

# **Teamworking: History, Development and function**

**A Case Study in Welsh Local Government**

By

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## Abstract

Teamworking has been a fashionable management idea in the redesign of work for over half a century. After being observed in UK manufacturing environments in 1950s, the concept has developed and spread widely across industries and international contexts. Today, surveys suggest that management practitioners across all sectors are enthusiastically adopting teamworking initiatives. However, empirical research has not kept pace with the diffusion of team ideas in different contexts. There has been relatively little attention to the concept in service industries and particularly in public services. This study takes up the challenge of exploring team ideas in new contexts, conducting a case study within the UK local Government. An ethnographic approach is adopted to enable the collection and analysis of detailed descriptive data. Central concerns include the way in which teamworking is used as a vehicle for organisational change and how employees experience management attempts to implement teamworking. The study findings suggest that there is as much interest in the idea of teamworking in local Government as in traditional team contexts. In the case study, teamworking was used as part of a wide ranging strategy of organisational transformation. More specifically, it was used by senior management as a way to legitimise strategic change and provide a soft veneer to a more demanding performance regime. The ambitious variety of new team initiatives led to considerable implementation problems and resistance from workers. Particular levels of management were seen to be trapped between the old approach and the new team discourse. The study presents a warning for the advocates of teamworking in appreciating senior management motivations for introducing change and considering the unappealing detail when implementing and maintaining teamworking systems.

# Declaration

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For my family

## **Acknowledgements**

This project has only been possible due to the generous support of various people. I would like to thank the following friends, family and colleagues for sharing their time, experience and resources.

I thank my supervisory panel for providing invaluable advice. My primary supervisor Julian Gould-Williams provided much of the early impetus for the project. He has been indefatigable in providing time and mentoring as I met regular obstacles along the way. Warm thanks also go to Mike Reed and Rachel Ashworth on my supervisory panel for providing incisive comments and encouragement at the panel meetings. The PhD process is an individual journey but periodic advice of how to read the map or reminders to look out of the window to spot important road signs are indispensable.

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## Abbreviations

AFL	Adults, Families and Life-long learning
AWG	Autonomous Work Group
BPR	Business Process Reengineering
BPT	Business Planning Toolkit
CAQDAS	Computer-aided qualitative data analysis software
CBC	County Borough Council
CCO	Corporate Chief Officer
CCT	Compulsory Competitive Tendering
CCTV	Closed-circuit Television
CI	Continuous Improvement
CIP	Continuous Improvement Programme
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CPA	Comprehensive Performance Assessment
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CR	Critical Realism
DLG	Dyffryn Leadership Group
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FARM	Financial Aid and Risk Management
HPWS	High Performance Work Systems
HRM	Human Resource Management
IAPT	Improvement Action Plan Toolkit
IAS	Integrated Adult Services
ICT	Information communication Technology
IDeA	Improvement and Development Agency
JIT	Just-in-time
KKPI	Key Killer performance indicator
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
KSP	Key Strategic Priorities
LGA	Local Government Association
LGMA	Local Government Modernisation Agenda
LPSA	Local Public Service Agreement
LSP	Local Strategic Partnership
MD <sup>2</sup>	Management Development (squared)
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NTL	National Training Laboratories
ONS	Office of National Statistics
PPDP	Professional Performance Develop Plan
QBR	Quarterly Business Review
QC	Quality Circles
QWL	Quality of Work Life
SMB	Service Management Board
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
STS	Socio-technical Systems
TNA	Training Needs Analysis
TQM	Total Quality Management
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government
WERS	Workplace Employee Relations Survey
WPI	Wales Programme for Improvement

## Research Participants

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An old man once told the story of how he visited heaven and hell. He came to a door that bore no name. He trembled as he saw it open before him into a large dining room. In the centre of the room was a long wooden table bearing a lavish feast of unimaginable proportions. Yet every guest was pale, starving and cursing each other. They had been given spoons that were twelve feet long and therefore were unable to feed themselves. The old man spoke in revulsion, "This must be hell."

The man then walked down a path until he reached a similar door. Inside he found the same table, the same beautiful food, and people holding the same twelve foot long spoons. However, in this room there was much laughter and conviviality. Everyone looked healthy and well fed. The old man smiled and said, "In heaven they have learned to feed each other."

**A Parable of Heaven and Hell,**  
*Author Unknown (Possible Chinese origin)*



## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction**

‘Team’ and ‘teamwork’ are two of the most commonly heard words in organisations today. If you do not work within a team of some kind you have an unusual career. All employees, from junior staff to senior management, are now encouraged to be ‘team players’ and work for the ‘good of the team’. These ideas have been picked up in all areas of management discourse. The popular literature has proclaimed the ‘wisdom of teams’ (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993) and formulated the ‘17 indisputable laws of teamwork’ (Maxwell, 2001). Meanwhile, simply being a ‘team’ no longer seems sufficient; we now need ‘smart teams’ (Beatty and Scott, 2004), ‘X-Teams’ (Ancona and Bresman, 2007) and ‘virtuoso teams’ (Boynton and Fischer, 2005). Leading companies even have their own versions: Amazon.com has the ‘2-pizza team’ and Google has the ‘Googlet’. Yet why is there such pervasive interest in this concept?

Buchanan (2000: 25) suggests that there has been an ‘eager and enduring embrace’ with the idea of teamworking for more than fifty years. Like many prolonged debates in social science, this interest has developed, fragmented and reinvented itself in the form of theoretical ‘trajectories’ (Mueller et al., 2000) and pragmatic management ‘waves’ (Procter and Mueller, 2000). Today, surveys record that in the region of eighty per cent of UK firms claim to be using teamworking of some kind (Kersley et al., 2005). There is similar incidence across Europe and America. The obvious explanation for the interest is that commentators and managers believe that teams are useful tools. They are held to contribute towards various performance outcomes including productivity, efficiency, flexibility, innovation, employee satisfaction and commitment. There also seems to be a moral component, as the epigraph to this thesis suggests. If you identify yourself as a non-team player you are seen as an undesirable employee or even an immoral human being. Teamworking holds progressive moral connotations for social organisations.

An important question for scholars of management theory is: to what extent is ‘teamworking’ a useful concept to describe work organisations and explain the

complex employment relationship in contemporary organisations? The ‘big themes’ of management theory over the last century have included debates over organisational *centralisation* versus *decentralisation*; *control* versus *commitment*; *routinisation* versus *flexibility*; and how best to *motivate* and *reward* an increasingly well educated workforce in an increasingly competitive world. Teamworking perhaps latches onto all of these debates. In the literature, team discussion is usually closely associated with the wider literature on employee participation and involvement that has developed rapidly over the last few decades.

A problem with the team literature, like much of the management literature, has been its tendency towards fashionableness. Fashions frequently lead to empty fads and hyperbole which have little substance in organisational reality. Gibson and Tesone (2001) quote Ginzl (1996: 90) to demonstrate the faddishness of team ideas:

You can, if you wish, flatten your pyramid, become a horizontal organization, and eliminate hierarchy from your company. You can empower your people, open your environment, and transform your culture ... You can improve continuously, shift your paradigms, and become a learning organization. You can devote yourself and your company to total quality management.

Fashionable management ideas are sustained by a range of ‘discourse entrepreneurs’, including: management gurus such as Charles Handy, who insists ‘Teams are here to stay. We cannot avoid them’ (1990: 132); the media, including broadcast, print and increasingly internet publications; and semi-academic literatures, for example trade journals and management magazines (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). A scholarly investigation into the concept of teamworking therefore has to steer its way through this maze of popular, fashionable and scholarly literature. It must consider the extent to which organisational actors consume and utilise fashionable discourse. This will also require a consideration of the historical and contextual development of the various team concepts.

Many different avenues have opened up over the last fifty years to understand and research teams. One way is to view teamworking as a general management philosophy which encapsulates organisational activity. Within this paradigm teamworking has been viewed as a form of human resource management (e.g. Redman and Wilkinson, 2007; Legge, 2005), as management control (Barker, 1993;

Sewell, 1998) and as a form of organisational change (Buchanan, 2000). Another way is to look at teamworking is from the perspective of individual teams. This has led to research looking into team structures and differentiation (e.g. Sundstrom et al., 1990; Macy, 1993; Cohen and Bailey, 1997); internal group processes (e.g. interdependence, communication, cohesion, mental models, conflict - see Cartwright and Zander, 1953); team roles (Belbin, 1981); and team performance (e.g. Rosen, 1989). Other important concerns have been how teamworking varies in different contexts (e.g. services versus manufacturing/ public versus private) and how individual employee experience working in teams (e.g. Sinclair, 1992; Harley, 2001).

Like many areas of management studies, the study of teamworking carries thorny empirical challenges. Since the topic relates to the behaviour and interaction of organisational actors, there are the practical constraints of collecting reliable social research data. Highly competitive organisations are not always open to the idea of external researchers carefully analysing their systems and processes. Equally, in a world where reputation counts for all, organisational actors are unlikely to provide frank accounts of management techniques and work experiences. Due to these challenges, the discussion of teams has been hampered by poor quality research data. There has been a lack of detailed description of team activities which has led to inadequate conceptualisation and hence the observed tendency towards fashionableness. Studies have also tended to focus on narrow industrial settings, such as automotive manufacturing, which do not easily translate to service work and public sector settings. This study will attempt to take on these challenges.

The challenges of organisational research should not discourage us from attempting to understand the complex employment relationship. Its impact on the current world – from the cultural and technological artefacts it produces, to the geographic and demographic structures of populations, to social/institutional forces such as class, time, leisure and family – cannot be overstated. Teamworking is an important concept in management studies within the broad field of organisational behaviour. A key component of this kind of research is uncovering the human experiences of people in organisational settings. Research can too easily attach itself to the powerful managerialist discourse of control and performance. While this is an important part of the analysis, theorists are increasingly recognising the need to ‘refocus attention on

the worker' (Guest, 2002: 335). This should include the way organisational forces shape employee beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore, managerial attempts to control workers through performance management and change strategies need to be considered from the perspective of workers. These will be some of the central concerns of the thesis.

### **Aims and structure of the thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to engage with the management debates about teamworking and make both theoretical and empirical contributions to the topic. The thesis aims to cover three main areas. First, we will consider where teamworking is placed within the context of management philosophies and theories looking at the employment relationship. In other words, where does teamworking sit with the 'big ideas' of management over the last century? and how did specific team ideas emerge? Second, the thesis will look at the strength of team theory. For instance, is teamworking expressed through a clear set of principles or is it a more tentative and contradictory concept? Third, we will consider the empirical evidence of teamworking and contribute to this through a new organisational case study. Following a review of the academic literature we will arrive at five key research questions for empirical investigation: 1) What is the motivation for senior managers introducing teamworking initiatives? 2) How do employees experience working in teams? 3) To what extent are specific team approaches in organisations clear applications of one of the two team traditions? 4) How does teamworking affect employee decision making? 5) To what extent does HRM support teamworking activities?

The first four chapters of the thesis will review the theoretical background to the core concepts. Chapter two will introduce the background to the debate. It will discuss the purpose of reviewing the historical developments of the concept and how early 20<sup>th</sup> century management discourse shaped the climate in favour of teamworking. Chapter three will then take this discussion further by introducing the specific events which led to the conception of team ideas. It will progress to discuss the main theoretical traditions – identified here as socio-technical systems theory and the Japanese movement. It will present each tradition's development, general principles, and assess

their relative merits for understanding organisations. Chapter four will bring the discussion up-to-date by reviewing the general climate of the current team literature. It will identify the various perspectives of looking at the concept with considerations such as HRM and organisational change. Furthermore, it will consider the role of management in implementing team change and how successful particular strategies are likely to be.

Chapters five and six will weave in a new thread concerned with the empirical foundations of the project. Chapter five will explore the philosophical underpinnings of social research. It will attempt to answer what the essential aims of social research are and review the various doctrines that have attempted to provide philosophical direction for social science. It will then identify the adopted perspective for this project. Chapter six will be more practical in orientation. It will set out the choices identified in operationalising the research questions through research strategy. It will identify the main methodological options and explain the adopted approach. Finally, it will describe the research process, including research access, ethics, data collection and analysis.

Chapters seven to eleven will present the main empirical component. Chapter seven will briefly discuss the research context, including the institutional context of local government, the local setting and organisational setting. Chapters eight to eleven will present the main research findings in the form of detailed transcript notes and quotations, along with supporting analytical narrative. The main topics covered here are team environment and management, HRM and quality circles. The end of each findings chapter will bring the relevant literature and the empirical findings together into a theoretical discussion. Chapter twelve will then draw conclusions for the research. This will include identifying the limitations of the study and considering the implications for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

# Historical Antecedents

### 2.1 Introduction

This short chapter will begin to review the extensive literature on teamworking. To do this it will first consider the significance of historical awareness in social science. Concepts tend to proliferate in the management literature with little awareness or connection to other ideas which share similar tenets and principles. The conceptual terrain of teamworking is no different in this regard. I will therefore attempt to contextualise my position in this literature before moving onto the central debate. The importance of historical awareness is stated along with the ambiguity of the ‘hardware’ and ‘software’ of social phenomena. I will then briefly review the early theories of management in the twentieth century which set the backdrop for management interest and movements towards teamworking.

### 2.2 The importance of historical awareness

A relevant question at this stage of the discussion is ‘what is the role of history in the research?’ An appealing response is *everything* we know is history. The aim of the thesis is to engage with the debates about teamworking in contemporary work organisations. It might therefore be claimed that the rapid pace of change in the nature of work makes any comparison of contemporary work practices with those of the past merely an academic pursuit with little theoretical or practical relevance for today. However, it is a central argument of this thesis that teamworking is a longstanding concept that has been ‘reinvented’ and ‘rediscovered’ a number of times over the last fifty years (Buchanan, 2000). Beyerlein (2000: xxiv) asks: ‘are we creating new developments with the design and practice of work teams or merely rediscovering the ideas of prior generations of managers and researchers?’ To answer this it is crucial to trail this history and appreciate its development. As Santayana’s (1905: 284) oft-quoted warning states, ‘those who cannot remember the past are condemned to revisit it’; or put another way, ‘an awareness of historical antecedents offer researchers protection against one of the gravest of scientific sins: reinventing the wheel.’ (Forsyth and Burnette, 2005: 4) A further consideration in the team literature is the

huge range of concepts and terms spread across geographical regions and disciplinary areas over time. It is important to appreciate how such conceptual and empirical variety transpired.

A strong theme in the management literature during the last decade has been the rhetorical emptiness of management discourse. An extensive critical literature on management 'fads', 'fashions' and consultancy has debunked the naïve prescriptions and empty packaging of concepts such as 'quality circles' and 'business process reengineering' (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 2000). It takes time to wade through this swamp of discourse to find the well-considered ideas and rigorous concepts. Social science has often been plagued with recurrent chameleon-like concepts that move in and out of fashion over time with little substantive progress. Eminent psychologist G. W. Allport (1964: 149-150) put this dilemma as follows:

Our profession progresses in fits and starts, largely under the spur of fashion... We never seem to solve our problems or exhaust our concepts; we only grow tired of them... Old wine, we find, tastes better from new bottles.

The reappearance of particular ideas does at least hint at an important undercurrent around certain concepts; some underlying mechanism or stable social pattern that is being detected. The problem being that we have not found a solution to the issue, a comprehensive understanding of its dynamics, or a way to progress with it. Hergenhahn (2005) suggests the major benefits of historical awareness are: first, a deeper understanding and appreciation of a subject area; second, less likely to repeat old mistakes; and third, a source of valuable ideas for the future. Reviewing the major debates of previous decades suggests there is often more continuity than change in society; more adaptation than revolution. It is therefore crucial to have an historical awareness of the work situation which has led to the development of teamworking and how far it has changed over time.

One of the biggest challenges to an historical discussion is the flexible use of language and difference between rhetorical and substantive evidence (see Benders and van Bijsterveld, 2000); or the 'software' and the 'hardware' components of phenomena (Rogers, 1995). Rhetorical evidence refers to the use of names and labels for a subject whereas substantive evidence refers to a wider set of detailed descriptions which do not rely explicitly on labels. Rhetorical and substantive

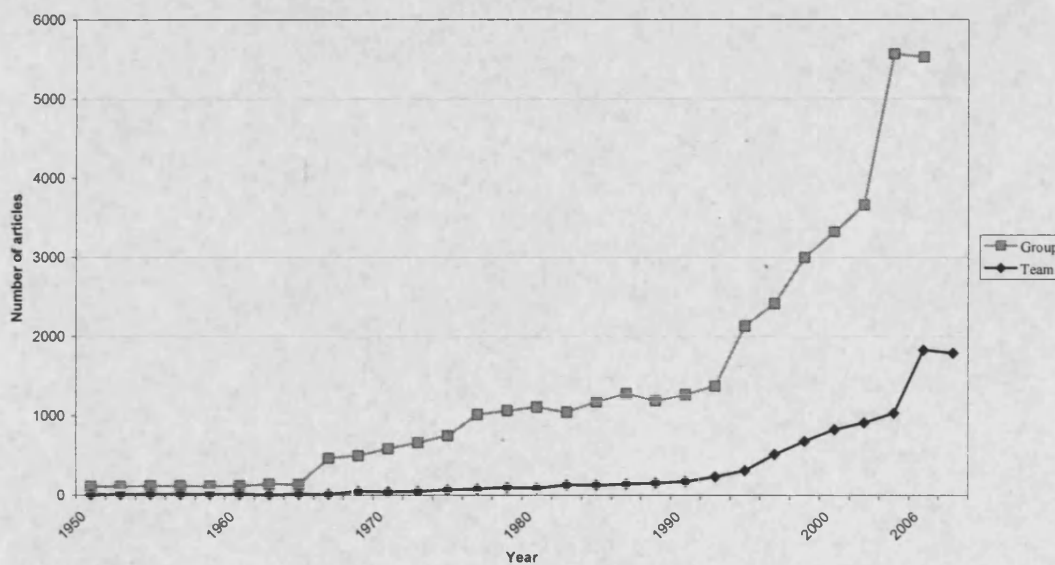
histories may coincide but this is not necessarily the case (Benders, 2005). In other words, what we call 'teamworking' today was not necessarily called 'teamworking' in the past. Yet, this does not mean that analogous forms of social organisation did not exist. The earliest use of the word 'team' can be traced back to the sixteenth century referring to a chain gang of horses used for labour. The term was not used to refer to human groups until the eighteenth century (Oxford English Dictionary etymology database, 2005). However, the word 'group' has been in use for many centuries referring to any assemblage of objects - living or inanimate. Beyerlein (2000: xvii) adopts a simple dichotomy among the various 'team' phenomena in history, suggesting, 'teamwork and possibly *work* teams [emphasis added] in various forms have probably been used for thousands of years.' Here Beyerlein uses 'teamwork' to denote any form of normative or functional cooperation, whereas 'work team' denotes a specific social group in the context of work organisations. Our concern in this thesis is with formal work organisations; that is, organisations with a legal and/or professional status. These proliferated during the twentieth century and permeate every area of life today. The work of many authors in the management literature is useful in disentangling the rhetoric and substantive histories of teamworking.

Before we progress to the historical review a few words need to be said to clarify team terminology. Over the last four decades many labels have emerged in the management literature around the idea of teams. Various terms have formed around the word 'group', including 'work group', 'autonomous work group', 'semi-autonomous work group', 'high performance work group' and 'groupthink'. These terms were the predominant use for cooperative social organisation from the 1940s – 1970s. 'Group dynamics' also established itself during this period and is still popular within social (and organisational) psychology. From the late seventies onwards a new set of terms deriving from 'team' or 'teamwork' grew more popular in the management literature. Labels emerged such as 'work team', 'self-managing team', 'high performance team', 'self-regulating team' and 'teamworking'. There are many other variations on this theme. The term 'teamworking' has further increased in popularity over the last decade, largely in Europe, since the introduction of the annual conference International Workshop on Teamworking (first held in Nottingham, 1997). The first publication from this conference was the book *Teamworking* (edited by S. Procter and F. Mueller, 2000). This usage is similar to Michael Beyerlein's 'work



team' as it attempts to put the concept firmly in the context of work organisations. This is in contrast to the general term 'teamwork', which is used in all social contexts. The terms I have adopted for this thesis are 'team' as a noun denoting a human group within a work context and 'teamworking' denoting the wider phenomena that occur within and between individual teams at work. Other terms will be used in passing when referring to particular usages in history. Figure 1 shows the growth in popularity of 'group' and 'team' concepts in the management literature over the last fifty years<sup>1</sup>. While both have increased rapidly over the last two decades, 'group', with its more general applications, has been most prevalent. 'Team' has been more concentrated within management fields such as human resource management and organisational behaviour. The graph illustrates the need to trace the history of team ideas beyond the last two decades, since this period has witnessed a rapid proliferation of team ideas and discussion, much of which has been fashionable, faddish and hyperbolic.

Figure 1 Growth of articles using team terms



<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 was produced using EBSCO Business Source Premier database. This Database contains comprehensive records of most of the generally perceived leading management journals such as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Review/Journal*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies*, etc. Two Boolean search strings: 'Team OR Teamworking' and 'Group OR Work Group' were searched every other year from 1950 to 2006 to find the total number of papers in the database on each topic. It should be noted that there has been a large increase in the number of publications within the database over this time. I did not adjust for total number of papers in the database as, for example, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) have done with this kind of graph. This is because my purpose is to show the general rise in interest over time (which is represented by increases in articles and new publications) and not the relative instances of the two areas over time.

## 2.3 Early Theories of Management

We will now briefly review the historical landmarks of attempts to control the employment relationship over the last century. Although these are well-rehearsed in the management literature, a brisk tour will set us on the right path for the aims of the research and lead us neatly to the emergence of teamworking.

### 2.3.1 Rational perspective

Since management emerged as a distinct class within organisations – the cadre around which plans are devised and resources are controlled – theories and strategies have competed to find a ‘total concept of management’ (George, 1968). What this might look like is unclear but the central aim is to resolve the ‘irresolvable’, or at least highly fragile, employment relationship (Rose, 1988). Storey (1985) refers to this more straightforwardly as the ‘problem of control’.

Edwards (1979) posits that management control systems correspond to stages of capitalist development, moving from simple or entrepreneurial forms, to technical labour processes, to bureaucracy (we now might add ‘post-bureaucracy’). In the early twentieth century managers were concerned with the challenge of improving efficiency in engineering and factory systems. The body of ideas that transpired has been called the ‘rational systems’ perspective because it viewed organisations as purely functional systems purposed on achieving explicit goals (Scott, 1987). Frederick W. Taylor’s (1911) *Principles of Scientific Management* became the most influential work within this perspective. Taylor’s thesis that careful measurement of work behaviours, processes and resources (e.g. through time and motion studies) could help to find the ‘one best way’ to achieve management goals has influenced every industry to the present day.

As organisations grew in size and management control became more complex, *standardisation* was seen as a more effective technique than simple supervision or rule-of-thumb decision making. Standardisation based on experimentation and scientific fact would provide authority that management, as well as labour, had to respect. Taylor observed that management coercion created only resentment and struggle in the workplace rather than compliance. Standardisation led to a strict

division of labour – each man worked alone. Job descriptions and work procedures were written in the form of instruction cards and inventories. Another important consideration was personnel management and worker motivation. Taylor despised the ‘systematic soldiering’ and resistance of organised labour. He rewarded his workers well for being highly self-motivated and productive. For Taylor, the work group reduced worker motivation and led to inefficiencies. There was no need for collaboration among workers, only a good working relationship between management and the workforce. For this reason, Taylorism is often seen as the antithesis to teamworking. However, surprisingly one of the Taylor Society’s core principles was to ‘promote understandings, tolerances and the spirit of teamwork’ within the employment relationship (Cited in Person, 1929: 17).

Other theorists placed within the ‘rational systems’ paradigm put similar emphasis on the formal or technical aspects of the labour process. The Fordist assembly line organised labour in a highly structured and simplified production process. Weber’s (1958) bureaucracy offered regal-rational authority, similar to Taylor’s scientific evidence, as the most efficient control mechanism - holding both management and labour to account. Fayol (1949), Gulick and Urwick (1937) and colleagues’ administrative theory helped formalise organisational structures, departmentalism and job roles. Merton (1957: 195) notes, ‘formality facilitates the interaction of the occupants of offices despite their private attitudes towards one another.’ Formalised structures are seen as independent of the participation of any particular individual. The power and influence of leaders can thus be determined in part by the definition of their roles and not a function of their personal qualities. These theories drew on the metaphor of the zeitgeist – the early twentieth century mechanical machine. Individual workers were therefore seen as simple ‘cogs in an ever-moving mechanism’ (Weber, 1958: 181). For this reason Bennis (1959: 263) describes this perspective as ‘organizations without people’.

### **2.3.2 Natural perspectives**

As the rational theories of Taylor and others diffused into industries across the USA and Europe, problems arose with the machine metaphor of organisation. While the rational approach had certainly increased productivity in various industries, this ‘total concept of management’ was failing due to the malign effects it was having on

workers. Motivation faltered and productivity started to drop. Industrial theorists picked up on the 'alienating' and 'dehumanising' impact of standardised routines. In direct opposition to the rationalists, a body of 'natural systems' theorists (Scott, 1987) emerged with the following thesis:

To administer a social organization according to purely technical criteria of rationality is [itself] irrational, because it ignores nonrational aspects of social conduct. (Blau, 1956: 56)

Mary Parker Follet (1924) was one of the earliest protagonists for a more collaborative and interdependent assessment of enterprise. She spoke directly about teams and how non-hierarchical committees combined with cross-functional departments would improve the work experience. The Hawthorne studies (which took place from 1927-1934) became the most extensive research programme representing a 'natural systems' approach (Rothlisberger and Dickson, 1939). The work of Elton Mayo (1933) and colleagues led to a proliferation of ideas about informal aspects of work and the importance of social groups. The new perspective emerged with the label of 'Human Relations School'. Rothlisberger and Dickson (1939: 559) sum this up:

Many of the actually existing patterns of human interaction [at work] have no representation in the formal organization at all, and others are inadequately represented by the formal organization. ... Too often it is assumed that the organization of a company corresponds to a blueprint plan or organization chart. Actually, it never does.

The Hawthorne studies examined the wider range of worker attitudes and behaviours in the 'natural' setting of work in contrast to the experimental method of the day. Rather than all work behaviours being directed towards the attainment of goals; many activities reflected the need for workers to adapt and survive - they were ends in themselves. Litterer (1963) suggests the formal structures of work are those parts which are consciously planned whereas the informal structures are those parts which more or less spontaneously evolve. Yet the informal parts are not necessarily idiosyncratic or random, they are themselves ordered through group values and norms. Thus, the informal structure has as much influence on workers beliefs and behaviours as the formal structure (Scott, 1987). According to Procter et al. (2004) this perspective has two main implications. First, regardless of whether they have any previous affiliations, no collection of people can be in contact for any length of time at work without forming informal groupings. Second, because of their resilient nature,

it would be futile to try to break up such groupings. The movement also demonstrated that previously ‘irrelevant’ differences such as race (Collins, 1946), class (Warner and Low, 1947), and cultural background (Dalton, 1950) had strong effects on allocation to work roles and organisational behaviour.

Barnard (1948) extended the sociological analysis of the Human Relations School to consider the psychology of the employment relationship. He stressed that organisations are essentially cooperative systems, integrating the contributions of their individual participants based on the *willingness* of worker participation. Barnard attempts to combine and reconcile two somewhat contradictory ideas: that goals are imposed from the top down; while their attainment depends on willing compliance from the bottom up. He argues that it is a ‘fiction that authority comes down from above’ (p. 170), noting the many situations in which leaders claim authority but fail to win compliance. Moreover, ‘the decision as to whether an order has authority or not lies with the persons to whom it is addressed and does not reside in “persons of authority” or those who issue these orders’ (p. 163). Therefore, informal work structures and incentives mediate the psychological response of workers to authority. Other important developments within the ‘natural’ perspective were Selznick’s (1949) institutional approach and Parson’s (1960) social system. This movement did not solve the ‘problem of control’ or construct a more convincing ‘total concept of management’ but its main contribution was to recognise the complexity of organisational life and the identification of many variables previously overlooked. The engineer’s toolkit of time and motion experiments and formalised design logics were ineffective at tapping into the informal basis on human behaviour. This work therefore opened the door to a wider range of sociological and psychological disciplines to study the employment relationship. For this reason Bennis (1959: 266) describes the natural perspective ‘people without organizations’.

### **2.3.3 Conclusions**

In summary, I have provided a rationale for reviewing the historical development of the team literature. I have also presented a brief account of the formative events in early management theory. Scott’s (1987) useful dichotomy of ‘rational’ and ‘natural’ systems perspectives was used to appreciate the contrast in attempts to understand and

control the employment relationship. The following chapter will consider the emergence of specific ideas concerning teamworking in organisations.

## CHAPTER 3

# Team Traditions

### 3.1 Introduction

As the twentieth century progressed into its middle decades, academic interest grew about the reality of work and whether the void between rational and natural perspectives could be reconciled. The period leading up to, during, and immediately after the Second World War witnessed an explosion of ideas about social groups. It is this period where we may locate the origin of the first theoretical tradition of teamworking. It is this interesting period that we will now turn our attention.

#### 3.1.1 Post war development: group dynamics

In the 1930s Kurt Lewin popularised the term 'group dynamics' as he expanded a psychological focus on individual differences towards a consideration of the ability of groups to influence individuals (Cartwright and Zander, 1953). The Second World War was an important catalyst in group research and development (Pasmore and Khalsa, 1993). During the early forties, Lewin undertook a large amount of work which emphasised the importance of applying group dynamics to social change. For example, he reported that he was able to use face-to-face group discussions to achieve a change in the attitude of housewives so that they accepted less desirable cuts of meat during the war period (Lewin, 1948).

The study of group dynamics advanced rapidly in the USA after the Second World War. Lewin established the 'Center for Group Dynamics' at MIT and later the National Training Laboratories (NTL) to consider the practical implications of group theory. The NTL's short management training programmes and 'T-Groups' can be seen as the first example of 'team building' or 'away days' that are enthusiastically consumed by organisations today. A major concern of group dynamics theorists has been team roles and structure. Benne and Sheats (1948) devised a model of group member roles including 1) group task roles; 2) group-building and maintenance; and 3) self-centred roles. Regarding structure, scholars largely agreed that it changes over time but various theories have been offered as to how and why it changes. Bennis and

Sheppard (1956) and Thelen and Dickerman (1949) provided early contributions; however Tuckman's (1965) development stages become the most popular description: 'forming', 'storming', 'norming' and 'performing' (and later, with Jensen 1977, 'adjourning'). In addition to structure, interdependence is an important consideration to understand interaction between team members. Thompson (1967) explained interdependence as taking three forms in order of complexity: pooled, sequential and reciprocal. Pooled is simply the additive effort of individual team members (i.e. the total output when the work of each individual is added together); sequential is interaction based on a linear process (e.g. the progression of a production line); while reciprocal is interaction based on a more complicated non-linear task (e.g. writing a report which involves the iterative input of many contributors). Later influential work building on group dynamics was Hackman and Oldham's (1975, 1980) job enrichment framework. Placing the emphasis on individual needs based on the creation of critical psychological states, Hackman and Oldham outline core job dimensions (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback). One of the main ways to fulfil these job dimensions is through re-structuring work around teams.

### **3.1.2 A wider organisational focus: open systems theory**

Whereas group dynamics was primarily concerned with internal group processes informed by social psychology, another group of social scientists working in post-war Europe were interested in using a wider range of techniques and theories which attempted to encompass the psychological, sociological and technical challenges of industrial systems. They were also more sensitive to the institutional and political context in which organisations operated in contrast to the abstracted theories of group dynamics and the 'closed systems' assumptions of the rational/natural systems. The enthusiasm and insight of one man in particular, Eric L. Trist, was seen as heralding in a new paradigm of group research in the 1950s within a 'socio-psychological' framework<sup>2</sup>. Beyerlein and Porter (2000: x) suggest, 'to some extent the history of work teams is the history of socio-technical systems theory ... Trist is the father of this perspective.' Socio-technical systems (STS) theory grew into a highly influential

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<sup>2</sup> Trist engaged with debates at the time about the primacy of the 'psychological' versus the 'sociological' in understanding social phenomena. He concluded that both were important, yet the 'socio' was super ordinate; hence a 'socio-psychological' framework (Emery, 1993; Pasmore and Khalsa, 1993).



perspective, spreading across countries and expanding over several decades. It is now regarded as one of two main 'team traditions' within the literature (Benders and van Hootegem, 1999).

The second main team tradition came much later in the 1980s with the emergence of the 'quality' or 'Japanese' movement. This was precipitated by increasing global competition and American concern over Japan's rapid economic development. Loosely, this period (1970s - 1990s) involved an interrogation of the cultural and technical management strategies of Japanese firms. The resulting analysis led to enthusiastic management prescriptions such as continuous improvement (CI), total quality management (TQM) and quality circles (QC). Widespread adoption of quality practices followed across the USA and Europe. Then in the early nineties 'lean production' burst onto the scene promising more technical efficiency than Western production systems. Teams lay at the heart of the quality movement and widely permeated the scholarly and popular management discourse (Abrahamson, 1996).

We will now consider the two team traditions in more detail. I will draw attention to the key landmarks in the traditions' development and then outline the main principles. Due to the high jacking of these concepts by mercenary consultants and popular media bandwagons I will guide a cautious and critical path through this literature, focussing predominantly on peer-reviewed academic publications. As such, trade journals and semi-academic publications lacking insightful analysis, such as *TQM Magazine*, *Empowerment in organizations*, and *Quality Progress* will be ignored.

## **3.2 Socio-technical Systems Theory**

### **3.2.1 Introduction to tradition**

The socio-technical perspective has been extremely influential in establishing and spreading interest in teamworking. Popular terms like 'autonomous work groups'<sup>3</sup> or more recently, 'self-managing teams' can be seen to derive from the principles of socio-technical systems (Benders, 2005). The official birthplace of STS design was the London-based Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Over the course of several

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<sup>3</sup> Trist (1981) suggests that 'autonomous work groups' and 'semi-autonomous work groups', both popular STS applications, were regarded as synonymous by researchers at the Tavistock Institute. I will use the former in STS discussion.

decades, STS theory evolved into a set of flexible and sometimes conflicting views about how to design jobs, work groups and organisations (Kelly, 1978; van Eijnatten, 1993).

The STS perspective identifies interdependencies, both within and between organisations, as the basic means of analysis. This is captured in the language of systems theory. Organisations are recognized as 'open systems' (see Von Bertalanffy, 1950) which depend on interactions with the external environment for sustainability. Internally, organisations are considered to operate through the synchronous function of two sub-systems – the social system and the technical system – which are independent of each other but must be complementary in order to maximise both quality of work life and productivity (Trist, 1981). In other words, there must be compatibility between the design of technology (tools, techniques and knowledge) and the social arrangement of employees. It is important that technology does not dictate the social aspects of work or over-determine the means of organisational goal-attainment, but rather that the 'joint optimization' (see Emery, 1959) of technology and people should be achieved by utilizing the adaptability and innovativeness of people in attaining organisational goals (Cherns, 1976). This latter point emphasizes the centrality of 'autonomy' to STS. While STS provides few standard recommendations, one consistent proposal was to implement self-managing teams. Benders and van Hooft (1999) provide a general definition of what a socio-technical team might look like:

A group of workers, generally between 4 and 20 persons, responsible for a rounded-off part of the production process, and entitled to take certain decisions autonomously. (p. 615).

STS relies on three main assumptions. First, while organisational design is not always completely rational, it is *choiceful* (Pasmore, 1988). This means that organisational members have the opportunity to identify various organisational design options and are capable of undertaking considerable change by choosing to implement particular designs (Pasmore and Khalsa, 1993). A key feature of organisational design is the *discovery* of choices (Ketchum and Trist, 1992). Second, it is assumed that organisations are *agreements* among interdependent people and changes in the operation of organisations will affect these agreements and vice-versa. Therefore, in addition to determining which changes in design will be most effective, it is especially

important to focus attention on the process of *change* itself (Pasmore, 1988). A third assumption is that employee participation and interdependent work (i.e. using cooperative teams) can positively impact outcomes at the individual, team and organisational level (Trist, 1981). This is because people are considered to be fundamentally *social beings* (Emery, 1993); that is, beings that depend on relationships with each other for survival and fulfilment. Advocates of STS suggest that the approach has proven successful in organisations throughout the world for the past four decades (e.g. Pasmore et al., 1978; Taylor, 1975). Over this time, STS has generated strong waves of interest in the UK, Scandinavia, Holland, Australia and the USA.

### **3.2.2 Origin and early development**

STS design emerged as a scholarly concept in the early 1950s as a result of research undertaken at the Tavistock Institute. During post-war reconstruction of British industry (late 40s - mid 50s) consultants at the Tavistock were involved in field projects focussing on the diffusion of innovative work practices and organisational arrangements which did not require major capital investment but which gave promise of raising productivity (Trist and Murray, 1993). The British coal mining industry became a central focus, given that the chief source of industrial power at the time was coal fuel, making the industry important to the British economy. Furthermore, the industry had newly been nationalised but was not performing very well. Productivity was low and had failed to improve with increases in mechanisation of coal-getting. Mining was losing popularity as an occupation, with men leaving the pits in large numbers for more attractive opportunities in the factory world (Trist and Murray, 1993). Given these challenges, the National Coal Mining Board commissioned the Tavistock to conduct a series of action research projects to study the problems in the industry. Eric Trist, a founding member, and later chairman of the Tavistock, became the chief project officer. The findings of the studies were published in the influential book *Organizational Choice* (Trist et al., 1963).

In the early stages of the mining project, Trist collaborated with Ken Bamforth, a postgraduate fellow at the Tavistock Institute studying industrial field work. He had previously been a miner and while studying returned to the coalfield to report on any new perceptions he might have. Bamforth returned with news of innovation in work

practice at the Haighmoor seam of the south Yorkshire coalfield; an observation which would provide the seed for the burgeoning STS perspective (Trist, 1981; Trist and Murray, 1993). Trist and Bamforth visited a variety of pits to examine the reaction of miners to the changing working conditions on the coalface. The resulting discoveries were published in the *locus classicus* of the socio-technical tradition, the *Human Relations* paper 'Some social and psychological consequences of the longwall method of coal-getting' (Trist and Bamforth, 1951). This paper described the adverse effects of mechanisation and changes in work organisation on the coalface. Before mechanisation, small multiskilled groups handled the entire production process autonomously under the 'hand-got' system of coal-getting. Trist and Bamforth (1951) reported:

The groups themselves were interdependent working pairs to whom one or two individuals might be attached. ... A primary work-organization of this type had the advantage of placing responsibility for the complete coal-getting task squarely on the shoulders of a single, face-to-face group which experienced the entire cycle of operations within the compass of its membership. ... Leadership and "supervision" were internal to the group, which had a quality of *responsible autonomy*. ... The wholeness of the work task, the multiplicity of the skills of the individual, and the self-selection of the group were congruent attributes of a pattern of responsible autonomy that characterized the pair-based face teams of hand-got mining. (p. 6-7)

When management introduced the semi-automated 'longwall' method of coal-getting, the work organisation changed dramatically. This method enlarged the scale of operation to work units consisting of 40-50 men, who worked three shifts and had their jobs broken down into one-man-one-task roles. Coordination and control had been externalized through supervision, which had become coercive (Trist, 1981). The interdependent nature of coal-getting tasks required close co-operation and intensive communication, yet the new shift system and the underground working conditions led to numerous difficulties in the production process (Mueller et al., 2000). Trist and Bamforth (1951) concluded that such problems would be difficult to resolve without restoring responsible autonomy to primary groups throughout the system and ensuring that each of these groups owned a satisfying sub-whole as its work task (Buchanan, 1994). These conclusions supported Bamforth's earlier observations at Haighmoor where miners had modified their work system in reaction to the problems of the longwall method. This innovation, labelled the 'shortwall' method, offered a solution

to many of the socio-psychological problems that Trist and Bamforth (1951) were identifying. Trist (1981) later reflected on events at the Haighmoor:

The work organization of the new seam, to us, a novel phenomenon consisted of a set of relatively autonomous groups interchanging roles and shifts and regulating their affairs with a minimum of supervision. Cooperation between task groups was everywhere in evidence; personal commitment was obvious, absenteeism low, accidents infrequent, productivity high. The men told us that in order to adapt with best advantage to the technical conditions in the new seam, they had evolved a form of work organization based on practices common in unmechanized days when small groups, who took responsibility for the entire cycle, had worked autonomously. ... As became clearer later, what happened in the Haighmoor seam gave to Bamforth and myself a first glimpse of 'the emergence of a new paradigm of work' (Emery, 1978) in which the best match would be sought between the requirements of the social and technical systems. (p. 8-9)

The Haighmoor miners can be seen as the pioneers of 'autonomous work groups'. It was their intuitive response to the technical challenge of the coal seam that led to Trist and Bamforth's initial observations. With the help of Australian academic Fred Emery, Trist readily used these observations to form the theory of STS. Further studies in the coal industry corroborated the early findings, discovering different configurations of teams across the industry and placing 'choice' (and hence autonomy) at the heart of the analysis.

### **3.2.3 Further STS development**

Following the early STS studies, researchers at the Tavistock continued to probe for more instances of autonomous group works, exploring a wide range of organisations such as Shell, Proctor and Gamble, General Food and a large teaching hospital. The general theme was again converting highly fragmented and individual tasks into a more varied group process. Trist (1981) reports that, in general, higher productivity and improved employee attitudes were experienced. However, the majority of the studies met with management conservatism and a lack of sustainability. Trist (1981) reflected somewhat discouragingly:

As the last years of the postwar period came to a close in the early fifties, the mood of the society changed from collaboration, which had fostered local innovation, to competition and an adversarial climate in management-labour relations, which discouraged it. No further instances of an alternative [socio-technical] pattern were identified (p. 20).

These observations led Trist to propose that no further advances in socio-technical work systems could be expected until changes in 'the extended social field' of forces at the 'macro-social' level were realised (Trist, 1981: 24). In other words, the small-scale and sporadic research projects of the fifties could not provide enough impact in the industrial and cultural context to change working methods across institutions. What was needed, according to Trist, was a more coordinated, Government-led programme of change. The requisite movement of this kind appeared to occur in Norway in 1962, with the introduction of the Norway Industrial Democracy Project. Norway was undergoing little economic development at the time and was seen to be lagging behind its Scandinavian counterparts. Large scale projects were planned in two of the least well performing industries – paper pulp and metal working. However, after several attempts the programme did not significantly materialise, as many of the project sites became 'encapsulated' (Herbst, 1976); meaning that there was no overall linkage or coordination between different areas of the programme and a consequent lack of momentum led to insignificant progress (see Cotton, 1993). The macro-social field was again seen to be the decisive obstacle.

A more hopeful diffusion took place in Sweden at the end of the sixties when the Norwegian project had generated some interest with Swedish professional bodies (Trist, 1981). By 1973, more than 500 work-improvement projects of various sizes were going on in many industries (Trist, 1981). Generally, emphasis was placed on job enrichment oriented teamworking. While the Swedish projects adopted the basic STS notions of 'joint optimisation' and the importance of the social system, in practice they were characterised by a pragmatic stance and many different types of experiment were conducted. Nevertheless, Sweden is possibly the country in which socio-technical ideas have been most widely applied (Karlsson, 1995). The Swedish projects led to some of the most celebrated and controversial examples of autonomous work groups: the Kalmar and Uddevalla plants of the automotive manufacturer Volvo (Berggren, 1993; Sandberg, 1995). These plants became a 'management tourist attraction' (Mueller et al., 2000). Saab also experimented with self-managing teams (Katz and Kahn, 1978). Like many of the previous experiments, the impetus for the change was workforce problems such as absenteeism, labour turnover and worker resistance; and general performance problems such as poor product quality and low productivity.

By the 1970s, the STS projects in Europe, and particularly those in Sweden, had created interest in the USA. Notions of work alienation were popularized by the media and associated with the threat of declining productivity in the face of Japanese and West German competition (Trist, 1981). At an international conference in 1972, the term 'quality of working life' (QWL) was introduced by Louis Davis. Along with 'Work in America' (O'Toole, 1972) this extended academic consideration to the mental health aspects of the workplace and the work-family interface. Management consultants hooked onto this change and put pressure on firms to modernise through innovative employment practice that they had packaged for easy consumption. In this way, team change was driven by consultants in the USA (de Leede et al., 2002). Since then, socio-technical concepts and methods have become one part of a wider field concerned with changing social values and studying the effects of ethical values on organisations and their individual members. The QWL movement made it less acceptable for boredom and alienation to be an inherent part of work-life and that workers must automatically accept authoritarian control (Trist, 1981). STS projects in the USA, such as at General Foods (Walton, 1977, 1982), witnessed performance gains in manufacturing plants and retail units but the success was again short-lived. Lawler (1986) and DeVries (1988) reported a 'mid-life crisis' when plants employed self-managing teams. Walton (1982) argued that these problems were simply 'reality setting in'. The QWL movement presented autonomous work groups as a key technique in the pursuit of its aims of improving working conditions of work groups to meet the aspirations and expectations of a more affluent and better educated workforce, and of meeting the perennial organisational needs for improved quality and productivity. The movement also embraced the job enrichment techniques that were developed from the mid sixties (e.g. Herzberg, 1968; Maslow, 1959; McGregor, 1960). Yet by the end of the seventies, the QWL movement had faded out of view (Taylor and Felton, 1993).

In the eighties teamworking was 'discovered' again with a fresh set of labels: 'employee involvement' (Pasmore and Friedlander, 1982; Lawler, 1986) and a 'culture of commitment' (Walton, 1985) where 'teams are the basic accountable unit'. Edward Lawler (1986) popularised involvement based on multi-skilled self-managing teams, describing this as 'a new kind of organization'. However, the teamworking discourse of the eighties continued to be on management's terms and there was

unsurprisingly a hostile trade union response (Parker and Slaughter, 1988; Applebaum and Batt, 1994). But by 1990, almost half of the USA's largest companies reported using self-managing work teams for at least some employees (Cohen et al., 1996).

### 3.2.4 Design principles and debate

Over the forty years of development between 1950 and 1990, a set of summarising principles emerged for STS design. Cherns (1976) provides an account of STS as characterising nine, and later (1987), ten principles. These are:

- 1) compatibility – the idea that the process of design must be compatible with its objectives;
- 2) minimal critical specification – no more should be specified in tasks, job role, objectives, etc. than is absolutely essential;
- 3) Socio-technical criterion (relabelled 'variance control' in 1987 article) – this states that any unpredictability in processes should be controlled as close to their point of origin as possible. Sufficient autonomy and responsibility should be provided to workers;
- 4) multifunctional principle – fewer highly-skilled individuals are favoured over more unskilled/deskkilled workers;
- 5) boundary location – boundaries between groups and departments need to be carefully designed considering technology, territory and time (Miller, 1959). Interdependence is a key consideration. Workers should be able to control and change their team boundaries;
- 6) information flow – information should flow to where and when it is needed;
- 7) support congruence – other organisational systems such as rewards, training, and feedback should be provided inline with the teams objectives;
- 8) design and human values (this was removed in 1987) – work should be intrinsically rewarding for workers by paying attention to the importance of the social system. Cherns (1987) later removed this because he felt that every STS principle reflected this notion;
- 9) incompleteness – as soon as design is implemented, its consequences indicate the need for further redesign. Constant change is needed and should be expected.

In the 1987 paper two further principles were added: power and Authority – workers should have access to the resources and knowledge they require to carryout their



function. This is related to principle six above; and ‘transitional organization’ – similar to incompleteness, organisations should be ready to change their boundaries and regularly redesign jobs. STSs are in constant flux.

We can elaborate on a few of these principles further by considering the two systems – social and technical – separately. Pasmore (1988: 25) provides an extensive list of factors within the social system:

The social system encompasses individual attitudes and beliefs; the implicit psychological contracts between employees and employers; reactions to work arrangements, company policies, and design features; relationships between groups, among group members and between supervisors and subordinates; cultures; traditions, past experiences and values; human capacities for learning and growth as well as for loyalty or dissension; for cooperation or conflict; and remarkable, uniquely human emotions such as love, hate, greed, charity, anger, joy, fear, pride, devotion, jealousy, compassion, and excitement.

Using more contemporary organisational language, the social system includes employee experiences of their work situation, management style, HR practices and the organisational culture. The purpose of a jointly-optimised socio-technical system is that it taps into the motivation of workers (Pasmore, 1988). STS attempts to grapple with the ‘whole person’, not just the physical or psychological parts required for the work task (Emery and Trist, 1972). However, as the Human Relations School discovered, this is an extremely difficult challenge. People are not fully aware of their needs as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), social pressures (Asch, 1952) and retrospective sense-making (Weick, 1979) affect motivation. However, this remains a central focus of STS design.

A number of Chern’s principles attempt to tap into workers’ socio-psychological needs. Autonomy is a persistent concern encompassing principles two to six above. In many ways it is considered the converse of programmed technology. STS theory holds an anti-hierarchical stance (Herbst, 1981) and prefers the absence of team leaders. If a leader is used they will act as ‘facilitator’, ‘coach’ or ‘spokesman’ rather than supervisor. Several authors have provided typologies or continuum for autonomy such as Heller et al. (1998) who suggest autonomy may be provided over: task control, pacing of jobs, changing processes, making supervisory decisions, boundary control and selection of team leader. However, Benders (2005) argues that ‘autonomous group’ is a contradictory concept because power cannot be shared

perfectly across several people. Likewise, Emery (1972: 188) states 'if everyone is responsible, no-one is responsible'. Furthermore, autonomy is usually discussed in relation to individual teams. The authority relations between teams and at different levels in the organisation are rarely considered. Nevertheless, autonomy remains a powerful ideal which is widely strived for (Buchanan, 1999). Another component of autonomy is the multifunctional or flexible nature of a team. When rules are minimally specified (principle two) and multifunctional (principle four) there is more room for individual differences than if work stations are standardised (Trist, 1981).

Another important theme that emerged throughout the history of STS and in Chern's principles is that of support systems. These need to operate in the 'whole organisational system' to reinforce the 'primary work systems'. Training is an important consideration here. Tjosvold (1986) notes that employees cannot be thrown together and expected to work as a team. They must undergo development in interpersonal 'soft' skills (Lawler, 1986) and wider task skills (Barry, 1991). Failure to provide employees with proper training has led to the abandonment of many STS arrangements (Cummings and Srivastva, 1977). Other support systems are pay and rewards and union involvement. These have often been overlooked in STS analysis (Kelly, 1978).

Pasmore (1998) describes the technical system within STS as consisting of the tools, techniques, devices, artefacts, methods, configurations, procedures, and knowledge used by organisational members to acquire inputs, transform inputs into outputs and provide outputs or services to customers. This definition of technology is much broader than one which limits considerations to mechanical or digital devices; it allows a more complete examination of how tasks are performed and how choices in socio-technical arrangements have been made. Emery (1959) set out the following features of the technical system: the natural characteristics; level of mechanisation/automation; unit operations; degree of centrality; maintenance operations; supply operations; spatio-temporal dimensions of the production process; and immediate physical work setting. We would certainly now add the role of information technology through local networks, databases and the internet.

Boundary management is a further issue related to technology and the task environment. Cherm's fifth principle states that boundaries should be clearly defined and controlled by team members. This has similarities with resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Ancona and Caldwell (1992) suggest there are four main external team behaviours: ambassadorial, technical scouting, isolationist, and comprehensive. The most successful strategy according to the Ancona and Caldwell is the comprehensive method. This is a combination of the other tactics.

We can identify weaknesses in the STS analysis of team design. Much of STS technical design was based on systems theory language and engineering design logics. Equations were frequently derived around work processes and group structures. For example, after some working through, A.K. Rice (1969: 580) provides the following equation for group task performance, where TP denotes task performance,  $f$  frequency, IR equals individual task role,  $IR^0$  irrelevant activities and related individual sentence:

$$(2) \quad TP = f [ \sum (IR) - \sum (IR^0) ]$$

The usefulness or application of the equation is not clear. After considering the reasoning of the equation, one must draw the conclusion that the relationships among the variables are not measurable precisely enough to make this equation practically useful. As a conceptual point, the following statement conveys the same ideas in a less abstract form: task performance is dependent on work conducted to achieve tasks. Irrelevant task activities and low worker motivation are likely to lower task performance. Here STS can be shown to have elements of a functionalist rational systems approach. It is unsurprising that some managers were unenthusiastic about introducing STS change when presented with these ideas.

A final theme coming from the history and principles of STS design is methodological. Most of the Tavistock researchers conducted in-depth ethnography and action research during the forties and fifties. The response from the prevailing academic community at the time was scathing (Pasmore and Khalsa, 1993). So much so that the Tavistock had to produce their own journal *Human Relations* to get their work published. Fifty years later, the journal has established itself as a valuable outlet of management research and has often led the discussion on teamworking. Eric Trist

felt strongly that social research should not be carried out in a pre-planned sequence such as quantitative attitude surveys. Rather, he believed the researcher must respond to existing and emerging organisational issues and be adaptive in its approach to the study of organisations (Trist, 1981). Trist criticised the literature on job satisfaction and other employee outcomes, suggesting too much weight was given to isolated employee responses. He questioned the value of a score of someone's psychological state since people change their attitudes from day to day and come to different conclusions about the same event. More recently, scholars have reasserted Trist's original advice and encouraged further study of teams in their natural context; to describe the team's work in detail; and to incorporate rich qualitative accounts of the team's experience, rather than rely solely on cross-sectional survey-based methodologies (Goodman, 1986; Ilgen, et al., 1993). Eby et al. (2000) note:

Unfortunately, much of the current research on teams fails to carefully describe the work that team members engage in. Like Trist, we strongly encourage future research to adopt descriptive, qualitative methods to the study of teams. (p. 124).

### **3.2.5 Conclusions of STS tradition**

The development of STS over the last fifty years demonstrated wide adaptation of the original STS premises. Pasmore et al., (1982) suggests that one flaw of the approach taken by STS advocates has been the selective reporting of successful experiments. As we have seen, the majority of STS projects ended with either modest results or a general decline and fizzling out. A recurrent explanation for the lack of success was management resistance to giving up their control. Schon (1971) called this the 'dynamic conservatism' of the employment relationship. Another explanation, offered by Tavistock researchers, was that the macro-level climate was hostile to the STS values. However, this is a highly generalised argument that is difficult to assess. How can the validity of a theory be argued for when it is seen to fail at a societal level? Surely society at large cannot be held as an unfair or unreliable arbiter of ideas. There are no other ways of assessing socio-economic ideas apart from, perhaps, cross-cultural comparisons. Generally, the main pitfalls of STS in practice were considered to be: resistance of lower and middle-level managers; inadequate training for developing the team (Harris and Nicholson, 1989); and lack of strategic long-term support from top management (Stayer, 1990).

Kelly (1978) argues that the main contribution of STS was finding that there are limits at which scientific management, through its ever increasing routinisation and job simplification, becomes counterproductive. Thus to overcome these limits, the transition from individuals to groups as the basic unit is required. Tasks based around teams leads to a ‘theoretical equalisation of workloads’; that is, workers shares the workload in a flexible manner. This overcomes some of the malign effects of alienation but can also lead to work intensification – for if a team member finishes their work, there is always more to do by helping the rest of the team. As Herbst (1962: 81) proudly stated: ‘no man was ever out of a job’. Autonomy is also a powerful idea, relentlessly pursued by the Tavistock researchers and still highly influential today. It is a firm reminder that although management provide the central coordinating framework of organisations they do not need to impinge on every area of work. In sum, STS has been a highly powerful but disappointing movement in the direction of teamworking. Procter (2005: 467) concludes:

...one of the most intellectually impressive practical approaches to organizing was development by the London-based Tavistock Institute. ...But despite clear promise, proposals using sociotechnical systems were actually little used.

We will next turn our attention to the other important influence in the team debate – the Japanese tradition.

### **3.3 Japanese Tradition**

#### **3.3.1 Introduction to tradition**

Due to Japan’s impressive economic growth through the sixties and seventies, American writers began to seek explanations for their success and consequently recommended the adoption of what become to be seen as Japanese ‘quality’ management approaches. We will now review the development of the Japanese movement and its influence on the concept of teamworking.

#### **3.3.2 Origin and development**

Before the 1960s little was known about Japanese work organisation in Europe and America. The first recognised post-war study was James Abegglen’s (1958) *The Japanese Factory: Aspects of its Social Organisation*. Here Abegglen drew attention to a broad range of industrial contrasts between Japan and the West resting on differences in historical development, cultural traditions and religion. Due to more

‘collectivist’ cultural values Abegglen suggests the Japanese employment relationship is more ‘family-like’ than American industry. His study heavily influenced further work on Japanese industry.

Over a decade later, Ronald Dore (1973) published the study *British Factory – Japanese Factory: The origins of national diversity in industrial relations*. This was a detailed empirical account of Japanese work organisation and according to Lincoln (1993: 54) ‘remains the most sophisticated and provocative treatment on the topic’. Dore’s study was a comparison between the factory environments at the Japanese *Hitachi* and the British *English Electric*. According to Dore, Hitachi’s organisation fitted into a steep pyramidal arrangement of teams, sections and departments, much in the manner of a civil service organisation or of any army divided into platoons, companies, and battalions. In English Electric managerial staff had titles which directly specified their functions whereas Hitachi’s management responsibilities were assigned to groups and were moved around individuals within the group. Similarly, British workers spent more time working alone while the Japanese employees worked as members of a team. Supervisors in Hitachi were expected to take part in routine group activities unlike their English Electric counterparts. Essentially, Dore points to two contrasting hierarchies: the English factory with a small number of sharply separated layers of management versus a Japanese factory with ‘infinitely divisible strata’ based around small groups (p. 275). Further differences Dore noted in the workforce of Hitachi included:

- work discipline ‘based on rules reinforced by exhortation designed to recall workers to the path of virtue’;
- more minutely prescribed and regulated work, and greater reliance on formal written communication;
- workers more likely to accept managerial authority;
- lack of union involvement (Dore, 1973, pp. 261-2).

A weakness with the studies of Abegglen (1958) and Dore (1973) and other studies of Japanese work organisation, such as Cole (1971), is that they focus primarily on repetitive manufacturing, usually automotive or electronics industries (Benders and van Hootegem, 1999). There was little description of other industries in Japan, such as services or public sector. It was therefore unclear how widely the ‘Japanese model’ applied. However, the key characteristics that emerged in the seventies in contrast to Western work organisation were a maintained focus on quality and minimisation of

errors, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and the use of continuous improvement (*Kaizen*) to incrementally improve work processes.

During the seventies and eighties many American and European companies seized on the idea of continuous improvement (CI) as it appeared to be one of the main sources of Japan's success. The main driver for continuous improvement was seen to be 'quality (control) circles' (QCs) which had been coined in the early sixties by the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers (JUSE). Lillrank and Kano (1989) describe QCs as 'small groups of employees from the same unit who, on a voluntary basis, use a set of tools and methods to realise a variety of improvements on a continuous basis' (p. 12-14). QCs often use established SOPs as the foundation for new ideas. Regular adjustments or additions to SOPs are favoured over radical innovation or change (Benders, 2005). Because they are adjunct to the main production process QCs have been called 'off-line' teams (Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al., 1994). Although they were widely adopted in the USA, UK and elsewhere their use tended to be short-lived as they realised little performance improvement. Hill (1991) suggests the problem lay with 'organisational dualism' - rather than a central process by which work was achievement, they were 'grafted' or 'bolted' onto existing structures in a superficial manner. Recent work by Delbridge et al. (2000) reports similar 'structural conservatism' and 'dualist' tendencies noting limited integration between production teams and indirect functions like QCs.

Caffyn (1999) suggests continuous improvement programmes are unlikely to succeed unless the following aspects are present: 1) Employees demonstrate awareness of organisations aims and objectives; 2) Individual groups use the organisation's strategic goals to focus and prioritize their improvement activity; 3) An enabling mechanisms (e.g. training, teamworking) used to encourage involvement; 4) Ongoing assessment of the organisation's structure, systems, and procedures; 5) Managers at all levels display active commitment to CI; 6) Employees right across the organisation get involved; 7) There are effective working across internal and external boundaries; 8) People learn from their own and from other's experience, both positive and negative; 9) The learning of individuals and groups is captured and deployed; 10) People are guided by a shared set of cultural value underpinning CI. Looking at the

wide range of organisational variables here, it is unsurprising that most continuous improvement programmes have tended to fail or fizzle out.

After the fashion of continuous improvement and QCs subsided at the end of the eighties, a new, even bigger, wave of interest emerged in Japan during the nineties. The catalyst for this was the book *The Machine that Changed the World* (Womack et al., 1990). The new jargon was 'lean production'. Rather than the earlier focus on Japan's cultural values and social relations, the new focus was on the technical production process. Womack et al.'s study of Toyota Motor Corporation described 'lean' processes based on 'Just-In-Time' (JIT) inventory and supply management and an ethos of Total Quality Management (TQM) (Benders and van Bijsterveld, 2000). A further explanation for the success of the lean production system was the use of 'teams':

It is the dynamic work team that emerges as the heart of the lean factory. Building these efficient teams is not simple. First, workers need to be taught a wide variety of skills ... Workers then need to acquire many additional skills: simple machine repair, quality checking, housekeeping, and materials ordering. Then they need encouragement to think actively. (Womack et al., 1990: 99)

However, apart from this description, Womack et al. gave little description about 'lean teams'. The filling out of this concept rested on the earlier descriptive accounts of Japanese work provided by Dore (1973), Cole (1971) and others. Morita (2001) conceptualises lean teams as having the following characteristics: 1) Multi-skilled workers; 2) Programmes for continuous skill development; 3) Allocations of tasks to work units ('one task, one team') rather than to individuals; and 4) Strong work-unit leaders.

### **3.3.3 Principles and debate**

Japanese teams can be seen to operate in a more 'constrained framework' than socio-technical teams (Bender, 2005). Strict routine and strong supervision were favoured over flexibility and autonomy. Given this divergence between the lean model and the STS archetype, Mishina (1994: 6) notes:

The word 'team' [used with reference to Toyota] is potentially misleading because it does not share many of the connotations associated with it elsewhere ... For example, 'team' has nothing to do with autonomy in Toyota, nor does it have the right to decide its membership. Toyota's 'team' thus



resembles small organizational units in military that are bound by a set duties and responsibilities.

Mishina suggests that Toyota's approach should be called 'hierarchy-based' work organisation rather than 'team-based' organisation. Dankbaar (1995) even suggests that the use of 'team' by Womack et al. was a conscious strategy to find a connection with Western traditions where teamworking and organisational development were popular and longstanding ideas. In a recent survey Delbridge et al. (2000) examined managerial perceptions of employee team roles and responsibilities in 'lean' plants in the international automotive components manufacturing sector. Their main findings were that the role of production workers was fairly limited in the areas of maintenance and production management and that significant responsibility had been vested in the position of team leader.

A lack of theoretical development in lean teams and QCs makes the perspective difficult to evaluate conceptually. Benders and van Hootegem (1999) suggest we can view Japanese teams from three perspectives. First, is the idea that the company or organisation as a whole constitutes a team and that this carries with it responsibilities for each individual. The 'collective spirit' pervades the Japanese workforce (Kieser, 1993; Ohno, 1988). Second, is the use of 'off-line' teams or Quality Circles. As noted earlier, the Western search for the source of Japanese industry's competitive advantage seized on the idea of quality circles (Procter and Mueller, 2000). Third, the Japanese production system (JIT/TQM) is the domain for 'on-line' teams. This is the small disciplined groups of multi-skilled workers operating as cooperative teams know in Japanese as *Han* or *Kumi*.

Beyond basic description and enthusiastic reports of performance gain, there is little theory to postulate why lean teams are effective. Empirical research considering the experiences of Japanese worker has suggested that they are not necessarily enthusiastic about being involved in team-based production (Lillrank and Kano, 1989). Rather they see participation in quality circles and related team activities as a requirement for the economic success of their enterprise. Japanese workers thus participate in QC problem-solving activities with honesty and candour, but do not receive any personal benefits from participation. Lean teams can therefore be seen to work through a stronger control system which increases expectations on workers to

contribute to improvement regimes; the traditional domain of management. Dohse et al. (1985: 128) draw similarities between lean teams and Taylorism:

Toyotism is, therefore, not an alternative to Taylorism but rather a solution to its classic problem of the resistance of the workers to placing their knowledge of production in the service of rationalization.

We will now look at similar approaches which followed from the Japanese quality movement.

### **3.3.4 Participative approaches**

During the two main decades of the Japanese movement, related ideas of 'participation' and 'empowerment' emerged in the management literature. These can generally be seen as synonymous concepts (Dunton and Wilkinson, 2006; Dimitriadis, 2000); participation being popular in the eighties and empowerment taking over in the nineties (Sullivan, 1994). For instance, the EBSCO Business Source Premier database contained only 16 articles with 'empowerment' in the title in the eighties but 585 articles using the label in the nineties. These ideas can equally be seen to feed into the 'involvement' literature which has grown from the mid nineties to the present with a strong HRM flavour (Marchington, 2000). Within these approaches, Teamworking is seen in the wider context as 'task-based participation' (Dunton and Wilkinson, 2006).

The participative approaches latched onto the ideas of CI with initiatives such as team briefings, regular team meetings, suggestion schemes and staff newsletters (Millward et al., 1992). However, they were generally limited and very much on managements' terms (Marchington et al., 1993). Writers such as Kanter (1984) argued that these approaches actually increased management control as participative practices gave managers a non-threatening window into workers' hopes and intentions. Rather than any substantive change in organisational decision making or management structure, the 'systematic use of the management chain has been reported as the most frequent method of communication between employer and employee' in participative schemes (Millward et al., 1992: 166). When a more radical process of empowerment is attempted, Fenton-O'Creevy and Nicholson (1994) found resistance from middle managers to be one of the most commonly cited barriers to success. Fenton-O'Creevy (1998) also suggested that management resistance to employee involvement has a

significantly adverse affect on outcomes. A weakness with this literature was its prescriptive nature and lack of attention to employee experiences (Edwards et al., 1998). On this issue, Parker and Slaughter (1995) equate empowerment to a management-by-stress approach that pushed people to breaking point by increasingly forcing workers to do more with less.

### **3.3.5 HRM and High Performance Work Systems**

By the mid 1980s the sustained themes of employee participation and job enrichment/redesign coupled with wider trends of Globalisation and increased competition provided the climate for more systematic ideas about personnel management. Conceptual models developed in the USA, particularly at the Harvard School, led to the introduction of Human Resource Management (HRM) as a new discipline. This was defined as:

All management decisions and actions that affect the nature of the relationship between the organization and employees – its human resources (Beer et al., 1984: 1).

This new perspective viewed the human resource as the most important and valuable feature of organisations. It took until the early nineties until this ambitious integrated and more strategic approach to people management had diffused into practitioner activity (Poole, 1999). The early HRM paradigm split into different trajectories – ‘Hard’, ‘Soft’, and ‘Strategic’. However, the jewels on the crown of each perspective were ‘HRM practices’ – functional activities such as recruitment and selection procedures, training programmes, performance appraisals and reward systems. There was an implicit assumption that HRM practices were easily definable and measurable (Francis and Sinclair, 2003). Using theoretical models of HRM these practices were seen to complement each other in an integrated system providing new hope for a ‘total concept of management’. The focus was both individual factors – such as job dimensions and ‘knowledge, skills, abilities’ (KSAs) – and organisational factors – including cost, efficiency and productivity.

By the mid nineties HRM had still not gained full recognition among other management disciplines so a more explicit equation between HR practices and organisational performance was formulated (Huselid, 1995). Purcell (1999) framed this as the ‘Holy Grail’ for the subject. A new literature on ‘High Performance Work

Systems'<sup>4</sup> (HPWS) emerged which sought to find a link between the implementation of 'innovative' HR practices with performance improvements. This approach provided some continuity with the Japanese debate as some of the main contributors were leading promoters of lean production (e.g. Pil and MacDuffie, 1996). There has been some consolidation among the type of practices included in analysis. Youndt et al. (1996: 839) point out that at their root these practices focus on enhancing the skill base of employees through:

Activities such as selective staffing, comprehensive training, and broad development efforts like job rotation and cross-functionalization. Further [they] tend to promote empowerment, participative problem-solving and teamwork.

Many commentators note the importance of teamworking within HPWSs (Osterman, 2000). Godard (2004: 351) even suggests that 'work teams...can be regarded as most central to the high-performance paradigm.' HR practices can be measured in three ways: by their presence, their coverage or their intensity (Boselie et al., 2005). Presence has been the most common technique. However, these studies have rarely made any distinction between STS teams and lean teams. This is probably due to the American bias in the HPWS literature whereas the STS-Lean distinction is most popular in Europe (Benders, 2005). An important contribution of this literature to the teamworking debate is an explicit consideration of other practices complementing and reinforcing team activities. This is an improvement to approaches which consider team 'support systems' as an afterthought to the main team design.

### **3.3.6 Conclusions to Japanese tradition**

Lean teams differ considerably to those deriving from STS perspectives. The quality movement had a central focus on incremental improvements to regulated work processes – predominately in manufacturing environments. Lean teams operate under formal supervisors and are expected to be highly subservient to the objectives and rules of the organisation. Like STS, empirical findings of lean teams are mixed but most experiments were disappointing in Western settings. Edwards et al. (1998) argue that the quality movement was more 'evolution' than 'revolution'. In order to find relevant work contexts, they suggest more qualitative research is needed to assess the

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<sup>4</sup> Many labels such as 'best practice', 'high involvement', 'high commitment', etc. have been used to express broadly analogous concepts.

ways workers experience the new dynamics of control within lean systems. This can also be seen as a challenge for the themes that moved on from this tradition, such as participation, empowerment and, more generally, HRM. With reference to the latter, Purcell (1999) calls for more qualitative work and Wright and Boswell (2002) suggest micro-level studies are needed in this area to explain what might be going on within the so-called ‘black box’ of the HPWS.

### **3.4 Discussion of Team History and Traditions**

#### **3.4.1 Summary of Team Literature**

There are few perspectives or movements in the history of management that do not make some use of ‘teams’ in some way. F.W. Taylor, who hated organised labour, even supported the notion of ‘team spirit’. The Human Relations movement heralded in a focus on informal groups and employee experiences. This movement opened up new paths in organisational research. Socio-technical systems design was a valuable attempt to integrate the rational engineering logic of interdependence, processes and system boundaries with the softer, more difficult to design and control social aspects of organisational life.

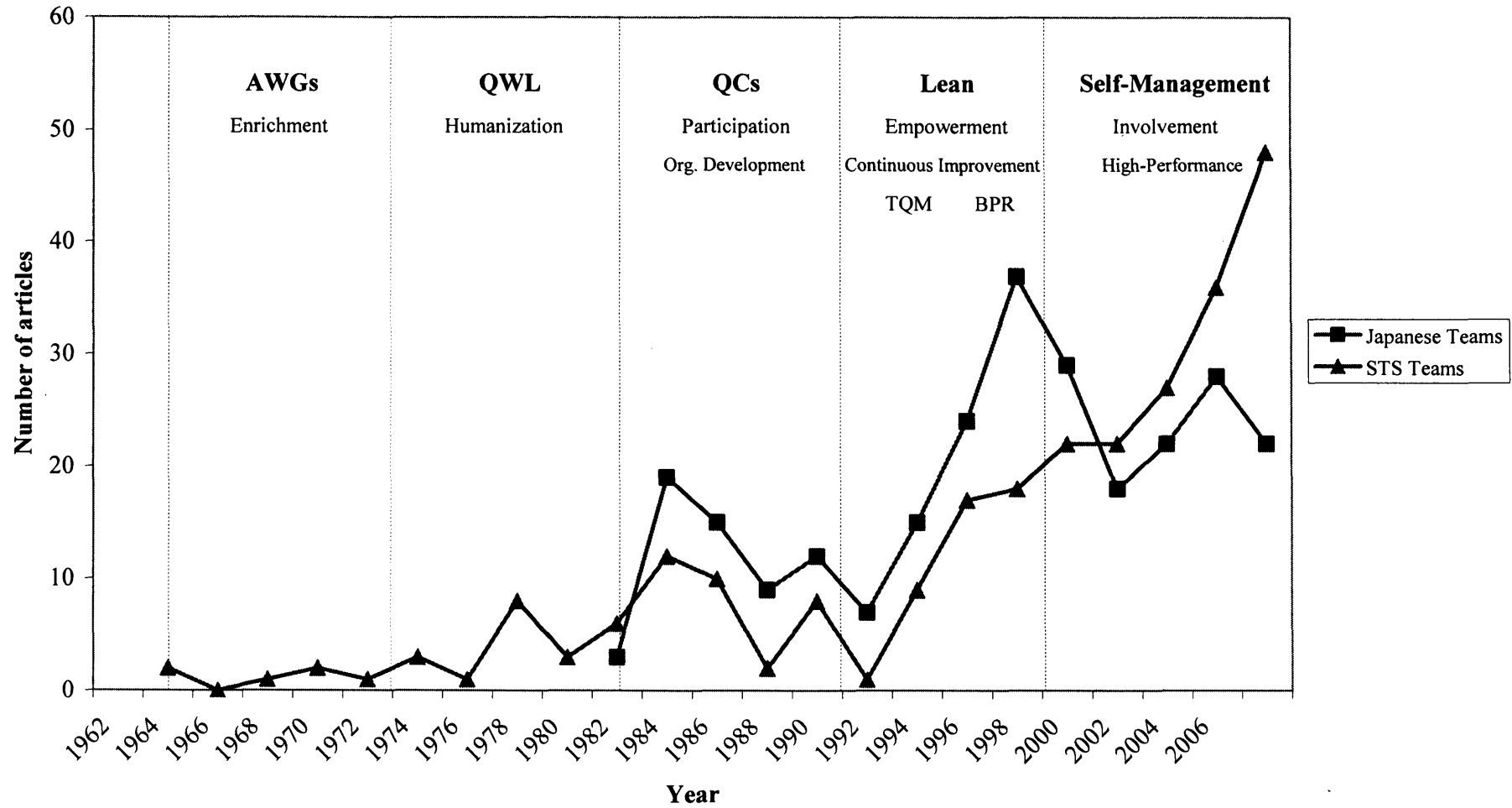
To help to summarise this complex history, figure 2 illustrates the growth of scholarly articles under the two main team traditions<sup>5</sup>. The two curves follow the positive trend of figure one presented earlier, demonstrating the most rapid growth in interest over the last two decades. To add context to the data, figure two also includes the main team discourses which have risen and fallen over the last fifty years. Just as we may talk about the cultural themes, such as music tastes and fashion, being attached to decades, it is also useful as a means of summary to talk of team ideas being attached to decades. Although this process of allocation is a qualitative assessment made by the author’s reading of the literature, this strategy of data presentation is also supported by the quantitative analysis of publication databases using particular team key words (for example, the rapid growth of 585 articles discussing ‘empowerment’ in the 1990s). This analysis has meant that the time period boundaries drawn in figure two do not divide precisely into decades, for instance the ‘lean’ period is shown as eight

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<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 was produced in a similar manner to figure 1 using the EBCO Business Source Premier database. The search string ‘Lean production OR quality circles’ was used for the Japanese perspective while ‘Socio-technical OR autonomous work group’ was used for the STS tradition. The abbreviations in the graph are as follows: AWGs – autonomous work groups; QWL – quality of work life movement; QCs – quality circles; TQM – total quality management; and BPR – business process reengineering.

years between 1992 and 2000; yet, for means of summary, the periods approximate to decades. As has been claimed at various occasions throughout the thesis, teamworking has become something of a fashion item for organisational scholars and practitioners. The preceding review of the literature has illustrated the regularity at which new team labels have appeared. Each time a new term comes into use it is the role of the organisational scholar to assess to extent to which the term represents a fundamentally new concept or whether it is merely a repackaging of previous ideas.

Figure 2 Growth of articles in team traditions and main team discourses



The various team discourses in the figure two closely follow the review of the literature presented in the preceding sections. AWGs were most popular in the fifties and sixties as the STS perspective developed. Job 'enrichment' was also a popular notion through the work of Herzberg and others. In the seventies, the QWL movement had carried the STS ideas to more popularity while in Europe 'humanization' was the fashionable idea. In the eighties teams interest expanded notably. Figure two shows the sudden emergence of articles on quality circles and a strong increase in the STS articles. 'Participation' and 'organisational development' were also popular terms. Then in the nineties an explosion of interest occurred, particularly in lean teams. During the mid nineties Japanese teams were considerably more popular than teams deriving from STS. Continuous improvement and TQM were related concepts that drew much attention. BPR also came and went under a controversy of faddishness. Between the late nineties and today interest in lean teams has rapidly diminished and STS teams, under the banner of 'self-management', have become more pervasive. The field of HRM with its HPWS increased interest in teamworking as part of a wider management system.

### **3.4.2 The position and strength of team theory**

In chapter one, three general aims were set out for the thesis. First, teamworking in the context of management philosophies and theories looking at the employment relationship; second, the strength of team theory; and third, attempts to develop empirical evidence of teamworking. The third theme will be the main focus of the second half of the thesis. Now we will reflect on the first two themes.

It was argued a number of times in previous chapters that a historical awareness of the team debate is vitally important for understanding the concept of teamworking. This argument stems from various observations of the team literature. First, teamworking as a management idea has been alive for a long time (Buchanan, 2000). Various authors have observed how it has remained popular for over fifty years. Debates among major organisational philosophies of the twentieth century – 'rational systems', 'natural systems' and 'open systems' (Scott, 1988) – provided the early impetus for team development. Second, although it has remained popular as a general way of organising, its labels, features and applications have been highly flexible. The differences between team 'software' and 'hardware' (see Rogers, 1995) have created



considerable challenges for researching teams. It is the flexibility and longevity of the team concept that makes history a vital part of the analysis.

Although there have been many approaches to study teamworking in the literature, with reasonable cogency we can argue that anti-bureaucratic, anti-hierarchical and improvement orientated concerns are most consistent. Teamworking is fundamentally at odds with the 'rational systems' perspective of organisation. Rather than focussing on formalisation, standardisation and rationalisation, it is concerned with the employment relationship from the perspective of workers. However, teamworking is not fundamentally a 'natural systems' theory either. The focus is not solely the informal, human aspects of work. Instead teamworking appears to have sandwiched itself between these two paradigms. This is exemplified most clearly in the STS perspective with the 'joint-optimisation' of the *technical* (or rational) and the *social* (or natural) systems. A considerable amount of space has been devoted to STS theory in the thesis because, as Procter (2005) and others have argued, it is the most rigorous project so far in the area of teamworking. We have seen various attempts of STS scholars to interrogate the relationship between the technical and social systems and to overcome the weakness of focussing on one of the systems too strongly. However, despite detailed attempts to develop both systems (e.g. Emery, 1959, and Pasmore, 1982) and link these together into overarching principles of STS (Cherns, 1976) in the end 'joint optimisation' becomes an unconvincing ambition. This is why teamworking has so often been relabelled and repackaged – sometimes moving to the side of the natural (such as 'enrichment' and 'humanization') and sometimes on the side of the technical (such as 'lean production' and 'business process reengineering'). But this does not mean that the teamworking project is over. On the contrary, it simply means that there is much more work to do in the area. We may reject the notion of 'joint optimisation' but still maintain interest in how the social aspects of work are managed to meet to technical standards of the workplace. Equally, we may investigate how the technical aspects of the workplace are utilised to meet the social demands of the workplace.

Due to the dependence of team conceptualisation on context, some authors have recommended that a case-by-case analysis of team forms is needed (Benders and van Hootegem, 1999). While this approach has the merit of placing primacy on the special

features of research contexts it also holds the danger of forgetting the theoretical and empirical heritage of teamworking; the kind of approach that could lead to the development of as many team variations as there are teams. Many forms of team discourse over the last fifty years, such as enrichment, humanization, participation, empowerment, and involvement, imply the general principles of anti-bureaucracy and anti-hierarchy. However, other areas, such as autonomy, JIT, and quality circles, can be seen as specifying something about the observable experience of teams. The informal aspects of the workplace, which became a core part of a 'natural systems' analysis, also say something specific about team life (see Scott, 1987; Litterer, 1963). In other words, when conceptualising teamworking, there are certain principles that apply generally and certain principles that apply specifically. When the general principles are present we know we are talking about teamworking; when the specific principles are present we know what kind of teamworking we are observing.

The analysis above does not lend itself to rigid theoretical models or typologies denoting team features, but instead provides a thorough interrogation of team history, team context and team experience - the main aim being to find patterns among the three areas. This places less emphasis on team terminology and therefore allows us to sidestep much of the fashionable hype. This approach differs from most team studies from both the STS and Japanese perspectives. Many studies start with a structural definition of a 'team' and extrapolate from this unit to the organisational level. However, as we have seen through the multifaceted nature of teamworking, and the various ways of looking at the concept, individual teams need not be the starting point. Team studies have tended to overlook or ignore this more complex arrangement and have instead focussed more on the internal development of teams processes or the organisational performance implications of introducing teams.

In conclusion, teamworking has come in diverse forms since its emergence. The two most persistent ideas have been 'autonomy' through STS and 'continuous improvement' through the Japanese movement. After conducting a historical review of teamworking, Leonard and Freedman (2000) offer the following recommendations for understanding teams: 1) Don't oversimplify the theory – they use Tuckman's simplified model of team development as an example of this; 2) start studying teams as they exist today in real-life contexts; 3) partnership needed between practitioners

and researchers; 4) research and theory need to move beyond the linear view of organisations – need to consider the political and cultural context more; 5) researchers and practitioners need to have a better appreciation for the history of research and theory regarding teamworking. While we have so far followed an approach that Leonard and Freedman would hopefully endorse, we will next consider how we can apply traditional team theory to understanding teamworking regimes in contemporary organisations.

## CHAPTER 4

# Teamworking Today

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will bring the team discussion up-to-date. It is important to consider the extent to which teamworking is a feature of current organisations. To do this we will consider its incidence. The types of teams found in contemporary work environments will also be considered including the relevance of team traditions. A main concern of this chapter is how to apply the extensive teamworking literature to designing new empirical research of teams. The focus is therefore moving towards the third explorative theme of the thesis. This will involve developing a number of perspectives to teamworking that are important for contemporary organisations along with supporting research questions.

### 4.2 Team Incidence

#### 4.2.1 Survey findings

The growing team literature of recent decades has coevolved with growing evidence of team incidence across sectors and industries. In the UK, the 2004 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS) found 72 per cent of all workplaces reported the use of team-based working for at least some core employees (Kersley et al., 2005). In a survey of 564 manufacturing companies, Waterson et al. (1997) found team-based working used to some extent by 70 per cent of respondents.

Traditionally, team research has been confined largely to manufacturing industries, especially automotives (Procter and Currie, 2002). However, given that work is increasingly being dominated by service industries in Western economies, research has slowly started to focus on service teams. Studies here include Cohen and Ledford's (1994) and Cohen et al's (1996) studies of the telecommunications sector; Lloyd and Newell's (2000) investigation of a pharmaceutical sales force; a study into IT consultants and government bureaucracies (Dyerson and Mueller, 1999); and van den Broek et al. (2004) study of call centre teams. A few scholars have also started looking at teamworking initiatives in the public sector, including Martinez Lucio et

al's. (2000) study of Royal Mail and Procter and Currie's (2002; 2004) project looking at the Inland Revenue. Nevertheless, research in this area has been slow to emerge (Procter and Currie, 2002). This would appear to be an important avenue for research considering that a third of all workers in the UK work in the public sector and the 2004 WERS reported that 88 per cent of public sector workplaces operate in teams to some extent (Kersley et al., 2005). Furthermore, the Local Government Workplace Survey (2003) indicated that 70 per cent of Local Government employees were encouraged to adopt teamworking of some kind (Gould-Williams and Davies, 2005). Thus, survey evidence strongly suggests that teamworking is a widespread management approach in organisations today.

#### **4.2.2 Empirical Challenges**

The evidence of team incidence provides an optimistic outlook for the status of teamworking activities. Yet the usefulness of surveys attempting to evaluate this is questionable. Benders (2005) argues that hard evidence on its incidence is limited given the linguistic ambiguity surrounding teams and the difficulty in researching at the aggregate level of organisations. For instance, many surveys evaluating the prevalence of teamworking offer little more than rhetorical understanding of how often managers, or some other organisational representatives, identify with something called a 'team'. Any substantive understanding of what the team *is* and what it *does* is often lacking (Benders, 2005). Surveys, such as WERS, which employ levels of increasing strictness based on autonomy, suggest that only three per cent of teams can elect their own team leaders. A European survey called EPOC found similar figures (Benders et al., 2002).

Surveys adopting a substantive approach (i.e. using structural and/or functional measures for teams) usually rely on the definitions and assumptions of one specific team tradition only, thereby excluding or confusing other team traditions and team forms which fall outside archetypal definition. For example, team systems may be predominately task-based in manufacturing yet normatively purposed in service industries. They may be, *inter alia*, used for functional assembly, sales, improvement, training, project management or cultural cohesion. As Delbridge (2000) notes,

...discussion of teams and their workers has been hampered by a tendency to collapse empirical difference and conflate terms and meanings. It has become

increasingly obvious that there are various forms of teamworking which deal with different types of work, are structured differently, have different implications for workers and different objectives for management. (p. 207)

It has become impossible to deduce what teamworking could mean in any general sense, beyond vague definitions such as 'a group of workers with a collective goal'. Dunton and Wilkinson (2006) note that teamworking is one of the most imprecise of all the involvement and participation practices today whereas Benders and van Hootegem (2000: 57) call the situation 'Babylonian confusion'. The task of conceptualising teamworking has become a salient obstacle for researchers. This is especially the case in service settings and the public sector where there is little empirical work to build on. It is to the conceptual clarification of teamworking that we will now turn our attention.

### **4.3 Conceptual Approaches**

This section will sketch out the attempts in the literature to produce a theoretical framework to understand teams. Before, we can try to draw links between different team definitions we need to consider the range of variables associated with the concept. Mueller et al., (2000) provide a long list of variables. They suggest that teams can: 1) be created on a temporary basis, in order to solve a specific work problem, or on a more permanent basis, working in areas of operations; 2) be led internally by an elected spokesman, or externally by an appointed team leader; 3) either consist of workers from a variety of functions, hierarchical levels and occupations, or consist of a relatively homogeneous group; 4) consist of members who are able to participate on a voluntary basis as part of their employment responsibility (e.g. by being nominated by a superior); 5) meet during working time or outside working time; 6) consist of team members who may or may not receive financial compensation for their teamworking efforts; 7) meet according to a fixed time plan or as and when required; 8) consist of team members who may or may not be involved with the implementation of the team's proposals. Thus, based on this list, teamworking has grown to include a wide range of apparently uncomplimentary and even conflicting features.

At one level, it is arguable that if a group of employees make use of any of the variables above then they are using teamworking. However, as was discussed in earlier sections with team traditions, groups of variables have often been seen to fit together into particular kinds of teams such as a 'lean team'.

#### **4.3.1 Teamworking as strategy of organisational change**

Teamworking is frequently treated as a form of organisational change (Buchanan, 2000). The socio-technical experiments all took this form; many being action research projects. Most recent studies on teamworking found in the management literature involve some kind of change programme (e.g. Procter and Currie, 2004; Martinez-Lucio et al., 2000; McCabe, 2007). In many change programmes, the 'turnaround' or 'transformation' is often treated as the task for management 'heroes or heroines' (Clarke et al., 1998). This has been the case in the public sector where one of the main strategies of organisational turnaround has been the replacement of senior leadership (Boyne, 2006). Various types of team change have been identified in qualitative studies and consequently Mueller et al. (2000: 1399) suggest: 'explaining actors' choices in the creation and emergence of these teams is a useful research endeavour'. One explanation for the popularity of teamworking being used for change is that it does not involve much investment in terms of resources and rapid change can be signalled by replacing the management discourse (Trist, 1981). This was the case with many of the early STS projects and continued in the Japanese movement through quality circles.

Mueller (1994) identifies three management objectives for introducing teamworking – economic, social and cultural. Procter and Mueller (2000) suggest that in the competitive work environment of today, there are more economic and strategic motives than employee welfare, which was important in the sixties and seventies. However, it is likely that management will attempt to combine several objectives rather than focusing on only one area. Emery (1976) argued that a cultural consideration of teamworking alone is not sufficient to secure real change because '[Teamworking] is not simply a cultural 'team spirit', team spirit is only going to be persistent and significant if it arises from teamworking [structures and processes]' (p. 405). Meanwhile, Bacon and Blyton (2000) introduced a dichotomy of team change approaches, based on the high performance HRM debate. They propose that there are

two management strategies: 'high road', which is based on considerable investment of resources and mutual benefits for workers and the organisation; and 'low road', which has a more basic focus on efficiency and cost.

Douglas and Gardner (2004) suggest that there are different influence tactics used by management when introducing teamworking. Yukl (2002) suggests employee reactions to management tactics vary on a continuum from resistance to compliance to commitment. This is similar to the so-called 'bewhiched', 'bewildered', and 'bothered' employee reactions of Knights and McCabe (2000). Tepper et al. (1998) discuss rational tactics (persuasion and consultation), soft tactics (inspirational appeals), and hard tactics (direction and pressure). The last is seen to be ineffective as it generates limited conformity and not commitment (Kipnis et al., 1980). Various studies suggest that trust is a big issue in implementing change, particularly towards a team approach (Procter et al., 1995). A further challenge in organisational change is the process of negotiation between management plans and employee reactions. This is especially the case when change is in the direction of more employee involvement (Coombs et al., 1992). Many formal processes of negotiation, such as consultative meetings and committees, are hampered by bureaucracy and political frustration.

Many lower-level managers give lip service to teamwork schemes but are reluctant to act on the rhetoric. Rathkey (1984) reported 'the more it [participation] existed in the company, the more it might be said that they disliked it' (p. 125). Marchington and Wilkinson (2000) point to three possible responses of middle and lower level management. First, management don't believe in the purpose of involvement; it is seen as something for idealists and not practical. Second, some managers like the idea in principle but have concerns about its application and implementation. Lower level staff may lack certain skills to make decisions and time is often pressing with important deadlines to meet. Thus involvement gets in the way. Third, managers may worry for their own future with participation schemes.

Teamwork is consciously espoused but unwittingly shunned by most people in business because they are deathly afraid of it. They think it will render them anonymous, invisible (Blotnick, 1984: 12)

Management conservatism was of course a major obstruction to the progress of the Tavistock projects. While management actors regularly advocate organisational



progress and strategic change, the realities of change are often as, if not more, destabilising for managers as any other group of employees.

Organisational change is a key consideration in teamworking initiatives. This perspective on the team literature leads to the first research question informing the empirical component of the thesis: *What is the motivation for senior managers introducing teamworking initiatives?* This is likely to address aspects such as the strategic function of teamworking and the tactics used to introduce team-based working. The question highlights the important fact that most teamworking initiatives in contemporary organisations are introduced by senior management as part of ‘transformational’ change programmes.

### **4.3.2 Team environment: roles and experiences**

#### **4.3.2.1 Team roles and support**

Belbin’s (1981) *Management Teams* is a highly influential work in the area of teamworking. Based on a series of experiments using a management training game – the executive management exercise (EME) – Belbin produced a range of theories about team leadership, creativity, size and, most famously, team roles. Belbin’s approach was to measure team members along a wide range of variables, such as personality, intelligence and age. He then plotted the relationship between particular team compositions (for example, all high intelligence or all introverts) against the performance of the team on the EME. He then drew conclusions as to the strengths and weaknesses of different team compositions. Belbin’s approach has methodological drawbacks but the results of the studies are interesting to help consider the processes that may contribute to team success.

After detailed observations of team processes, Belbin arrives at eight essential roles in teams. There are: 1) Company worker - strong organiser, practical with common sense; 2) Chairman - calm, self confident and controlled); 3) Shaper – highly strung, outgoing and dynamic; 4) Plant – individualistic, serious-minded and unorthodox; 5) Resource investigator – extroverted, enthusiastic and communicative; 6) Monitor-evaluator – sober, unemotional, prudent; 7) Teamworker – socially orientated, rather mild and sensitive; 8) and Completer-finisher – painstaking, orderly and

conscientious. For Belbin, the ideal is a good balance among these roles. Managers and team members can then use these guidelines to develop a good mix in a team.

In addition to team roles, another important consideration for understanding team processes is team support. West (2004) outlines four main types of social support in teams. These include: 1) Emotional – being able to voice concerns; 2) Instrumental – practical support on work tasks; 3) Informational – updating the team with news and events; 4) and appraisal – helping to make sense of problem situations. West (2004) argues that a key precursor to each kind of team support is the human need for belongingness. This is the need for frequent interaction; sense of stability and continuity; mutual support and concern; and freedom from chronic conflict. Working in teams, through close proximity and interdependence, offers strong opportunities for belonging. Carter and West (1999) argue that the benefits of social interaction in teams can lead to less work-related stress than working alone. West (2004) notes:

Those who can chat to and joke with other workers suffer fewer problems of job-related mental health than those who, because of the noise or the design of their jobs, are unable to enjoy conversations with those around them (p. 156).

Understanding how team roles interplay with team support is an important consideration when studying teams.

#### **4.3.2.2 Employee Experiences**

Employee experiences of teamworking vary considerably. Knights and McCabe (2000) found that teamworking in UK-based automotive manufacturing led to three types of employee experience; namely, the ‘bewitched’ – those who tended to consider teamworking as a positive experience; the ‘bothered’ – those who resented the intrusion of teamworking in their private lives; and the ‘bewildered’ – those who simply dismissed teamworking as nothing new.

Many studies highlight the difference between management rhetoric and employee reality (Hales, 2000). Wilkinson et al. (1997) present a table to show the two reverse interpretations of the same phenomena. For example, for what might be ‘education’ for management can be seen as ‘indoctrination’ by employees. There are always many interpretations of phenomena and those of management and workers are often contradictory.

Table 1 **Bouquets and brickbats: contrasting meanings of participation**

<i>Bouquets</i>	<i>Brickbats</i>
Education	Indoctrination
Empowerment	Emasculation
Liberating	Controlling
Delaying	Intensification
Teamwork	Peer-group pressure
Responsibility	Surveillance
Post-Fordism	Neo-fordism
Blame-free culture	Identification of errors
Commitment	Compliance

*Source: Wilkinson et al., 1997*

Large parts of the team literature adopt a partisan approach to teams – either they warmly support it or virulently criticise it. Proponents of teamworking describe it as a radical change in the traditional managerial and authority structure of an organization (e.g. Orsburn et al., 1990; Wellins et al., 1991). They tend to adopt a unitarist approach and see teams as impacting workers through reduction in stress, improved motivation, enhanced learning and increased productivity (Karasek, 1979; Applebaum et al., 2000). Hodson's (2002: 520) meta-analysis of 120 workplace ethnographies looking at employee participation and teamwork suggests somewhat simplistically, 'All [types of participation] appear to be potentially positive contributors to an improved workplace environment and to improved opportunities for positive work-life experiences'. From this view, teamworking thus promises mutual benefits - workers benefit through enhanced workplace experiences and development; while the organisation benefits through increased performance. Some go as far as to proclaim benefits for society at large by alleviating the malaise of alienation and other by-products of industrial society (Johnson and Johnson, 1987).

In contrast to the up-beat message of supporters, a critical perspective has emerged in the last few decades revealing a darker side to team-based systems. For example, Sinclair (1992) warns of the 'tyranny' that a 'team ideology' can create, while Barker (1993) describes how teams 'tighten the iron cage' through increased peer controls. Harley (2001) sums up the general findings of this critical perspective:

The central argument put forward in many of the critical studies is that teamwork, while apparently empowering employees, generates new forms of

control which assist management in extracting labour from employees via work intensification ... Critical accounts almost invariably make employee experience of teamwork absolutely central to their analyses and explicitly question the unitarist assumptions that positive employee experiences and improved organisational performance are necessarily natural partners (p. 725).

In addition to work intensification and stress that arise from the immediate team environment, wider institutional structures and pressures can lead to contradictory employee experiences. For example, individuals empowered to make decisions may be unwilling to use their discretion if they feel continually under the gaze of 'big brother'. This is perhaps most apparent in the public sector as 'technologies of distrust' (Miller, 1997) and the audit society (Power, 1997) undermine professional judgement, or at least place such judgement under the gaze of rational (accounting) expertise. Sennett (1998) has provided one of the strongest attacks on teamworking. He takes the concept to be about flexibility and argues that it leads to 'corrosive trends' such as fragmentation and loss of meaning to work life. Further, he suggests that the transience of team tasks and structures do not allow employees to develop essential loyalties and trust at work.

As with most organisational phenomena, the polarized views of apostles and cynics pencil a perimeter around the range of possible outcomes arising from team-based systems. As Jenkins (1994) notes, in practice the vast number of cases will fall somewhere between the two extremes. The empirical picture is blurred to some extent by the vast variety of texts under the teamworking umbrella. Many positive accounts offer a unitarist perspective, are based on anecdotal evidence and are largely prescriptive in nature (e.g. Katzenback and Smith, 1993; Thompson, 2000). In contrast, critical accounts are primarily case studies based on sociological analyses of worker experiences (e.g. Barker, 1993; Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Parker and Slaughter, 1988). The majority of scholarly works offer more tempered analyses of the forms and effects of context-specific teamworking systems. In Buchanan's (2000) words, 'the literature is liberally sprinkled with one-shot implementation case studies in which researchers withdraw to construct reports just as the success of a teamwork initiative has been established.' (p. 36). If researchers stay around a little longer they often find the programme fizzling out due to a general lack of enthusiasm and momentum. The initial hope of a new and more enjoyable work experience is readily

ruined under the rubble of bureaucracy, meetings, and mundane routines. As Herzberg (1972: 118) notes, when ‘adding another meaningless task to the existing one, the arithmetic is adding zero to zero’. Rather than being characterised as either blissful or unbearable, work appears for many employees to be simply rather boring.

This perspective on the team debate leads to the second research question for the study: *How do employees experience working in teams?* In particular, this question will look at employee experiences of carryout work and meeting deadlines in teams, the extent and form of interdependence, and team member development.

### 4.3.3 Reconciling team traditions

A fundamental challenge for understanding teamworking today is how to treat the often competing traditions of self-managing teams (socio-technical) and lean teams (Japanese). Many theorists working within one of the two traditions continue to use their own archetypal definitions and tend to ignore other traditions. Other commentators have confused the debate by conflating the two traditions and recasting history as if there was one coherent team concept. For example, Taylor (2005)<sup>6</sup> reports

One method of altering work arrangements to improve efficiency and quality that has of late received a great deal of attention is teamworking. The approach is derived from Japanese management practices and involves giving autonomous or semi-autonomous groups of employees responsibility for carrying out a particular task or group of tasks. (p. 161)

Taylor’s error will be obvious to the reader at this stage in the discussion – Japanese practices and autonomous groups do not traditionally go hand in hand. However, other researchers have argued that the apparently clear distinction between the traditions is misleading given that a large part of the difference can be explained with reference to the ‘output characteristics’ of different work contexts (Benders and van Hooft, 1999). In more recent work, these authors have attempted to integrate the two traditions by appealing to broad similarities in principles. Procter and Mueller (2000) suggest that the characteristics of the current wave of interest in teamworking

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that this publication is a core text for one of the CIPD’s professional training modules and the author is one of the CIPD’s course examiners. Thus, the UK’s future HR managers, who will be responsible for implementing HRM and organisational change programmes, are likely to share a similar confusion about the origins and definitions of teamworking.

– its strategic nature and emphasis on performance – makes the tradition’s similarities more important than their differences. Procter et al. (2005) re-label Japanese teams ‘leader-guided teams’ as a way to de-contextualise this type from the typical manufacturing work environment. They suggest that the difference between the traditions hinges on the ‘ambiguous concept of “autonomy”’ (p. 22). There have been a number of attempts to overcome the ‘issue of autonomy’ (Bender and van Hootegem, 1999) by constructing new definitions which encompass both teams exhibiting ‘autonomy’ and those which do not. For example, Mueller (1994) considers autonomy as a variable rather than a defining feature of teams. This is of course the main issue in STS team. We will consider this issue a little further.

This issue leads to the third research question for the study: *To what extent are specific team approaches in organisations clear applications of one of the two team traditions?* This question is interested in how managers have picked up the idea of teamworking and how team activities reflect the features of either the STS or Japanese archetypes.

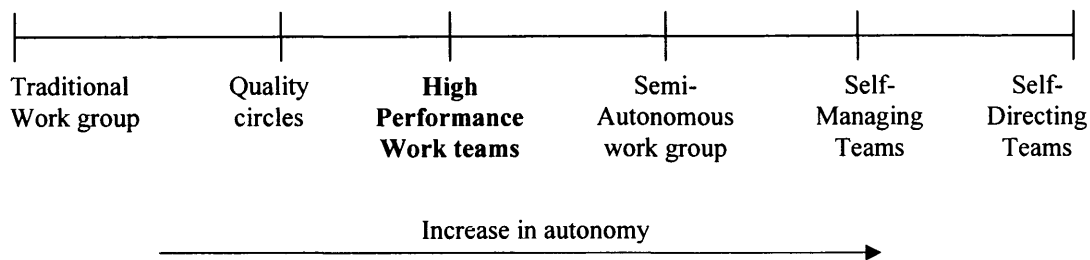
#### **4.3.4 The ‘Issue of autonomy’**

Rather than considering autonomy a binary phenomena – being ‘on’/‘off’ or ‘present’/‘not present’ – discussion of the concept has become increasingly sophisticated in recent years. For several decades commentators have argued that the ‘autonomous imperative’ shares some of the prejudices of the ‘one best way’ of Taylorism (Kelly, 1978; Hackman, 1979). It is sometimes seen as an uncompromising ideal; or today, a ‘best practice’. Yet Benders (2005) reminded us that it is an impossible ideal – workers automatically give up some freedom when they sell their labour through employment contracts. There is also no coherent manner in which ‘autonomy’ can be shared among a group of people – certain individuals will always have more influence than others. Furthermore, it is unclear whether autonomy should be regarded as primarily a sociological or psychological phenomenon. In other words, is autonomy a feature of a social structure and system, such as the formal authority to make certain decisions? Or is it something which individuals perceive to be the case, such as, ‘I feel in control with my work?’ or ‘I have the freedom to make suggestions’. Commentators have tended to consider the former, sociological kind, since it is possible for workers to be ‘colonised from within’ or ‘bewitched’ into

thinking they have more control than they actually do (Rosenthal, 2004; Knights and McCabe, 2000).

Banker et al. (1996) set out a 'continuum of autonomy' (see figure 4). Starting with 'traditional work groups', scale of increasing autonomy is presented ending with 'self-directed teams' at the other extreme.

Figure 3 **Team Autonomy Continuum**

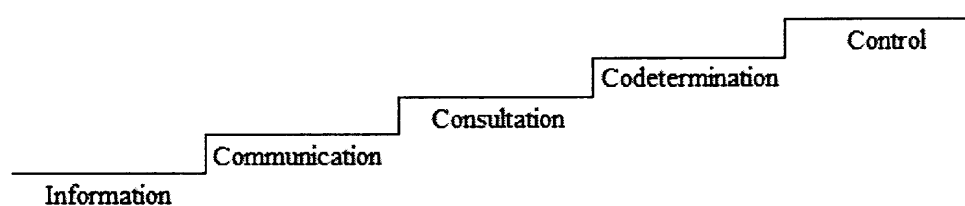


Source: Banker et al. (1996) *Academy of Management Journal*, 39(4), p. 868

First, traditional groups are held to be basic assemblages of employees that carry out the core work function. They have no management responsibility and are directed by a strong team leader. Second, is quality circles. This group has responsibility for making suggestions but not the authority to make decisions. No changes are made to the day-to-day production process to accommodate the team. Third, are semi-autonomous work groups. Workers manage and execute the major production activities. Other groups provide support activities but the group has responsibility for the main tasks. Fourth, is self-managing teams. These have responsibility for self-regulation of tasks in a rounded production process. Fifth, self-designing teams. These have all of the characteristics of self-managing teams but also have the authority to select team leaders and redesign the team's objectives. Banker et al. offer 'high performance teams' as the most common type in organisations. These lie somewhere between limited quality circles and semi-autonomous groups with responsibility over the major production process.

With similarities to the continuum of autonomy, Marchington has long promoted his ‘escalator of participation’ (figure 5) (Marchington, 1980; 1992; 2000; Marchington et al., 1992; Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). This has been used within a general framework of participation and involvement but also with direct reference to teamworking.

Figure 4 Escalator of Participation



Source: M. Marchington (1992) *Managing the Team*. London: Blackwell. p. 24.

Marchington and Wilkinson (2005) suggest that autonomy can be seen to take the form of *degree*, *level*, *range* and *form*. First, *degree* indicates the extent to which employees are able to influence decisions about various aspects of management; whether they are simply informed by changes, consulted, or actually given the authority to make decisions. This can be seen in figure 5. Second, there is the *level* at which participation takes place – task, departmental, corporate, etc. Third, there is the *range* of subject - from relatively trivial, such as canteen food, to more strategic concerns, such as investment strategies. Fourth, there is the *form* of involvement whether is it face-to-face groups, using representatives or written communications. It is possible map out particular categories of autonomy for individual teams using this framework. Thus autonomy is not a one-dimensional concept. It can be treated as having levels or many other variables. However, while both of these models are useful at identifying contextual variables relating to autonomy, they imply that teams will have a relatively stable measure of autonomy. They overlook the possibility that autonomy could change over time within teams.

The ‘issue of autonomy’ leads to the fourth research question: *How does teamworking affect decision making?* This will involve consideration of team management style and leadership, the extent to which team members are given



autonomy over their work and how team meetings provide a forum for decision making and collaboration.

#### **4.3.5 Teamworking in the context of HRM**

As a paradigm, HRM simultaneously promotes individualism and collectivism (Legge, 2005). Individualism comes through the objectives of HR practices such as recruitment and selection, performance appraisals and rewards. Collectivism, on the other hand, is promoted through a strong organisational culture and teamworking. Over the last decade teamworking has increasingly been used as a component of HR systems and links neatly with the STS idea of 'support systems'. One report regards HR as the 'scaffolding' needed to support teamworking activities (IRS, 1995: 5). This is consistent with a stream of independent research based on high performance work systems, in which teamworking and 'high involvement' practices have been found to lead to enhanced performance outcomes (Arthur, 1994; MacDuffie, 1995). As noted by Currie and Procter (2003), it is possible that certain HR practices may have a more significant effect than other practices on the outcomes of teamworking activities. For instance, Geary and Dobbins (2001) report that training and skill development, innovative payment systems and union support are particularly important factors to consider. Bacon and Blyton (2000) found that teamworking based on the 'high-involvement' model (Wood and deMenezes, 1998) had a profound effect on organisational and employee performance outcomes, with employee motivation being even greater where managers were prepared to relinquish tight control over workers. Further, it is now thought that the combination of HR practices (generally referred to as HR 'bundles') will have an even greater effect than individual practices on performance outcomes (Guest et al., 2004).

The nature and effects of teamworking are now thought to be highly dependent on context (e.g. Cohen et al., 1996; Mueller et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2001) to the extent that, 'to discuss teamwork without reference to the organisational and political context is a pointless exercise.' (Martinez Lucio et al., 2000: 275). Procter and Mueller (2000) identify three HR context-based variables they claim influence team effectiveness. These are reward and appraisal, training and development and industrial relations.

Even though commentators concur that reward management is an important HR practice influencing the outcomes of teamworking, the literature appears to be ambivalent about what form rewards should take (Procter and Mueller, 2000). Apart from identifying 'ill-suited' payment systems (Procter and Mueller, 2000: 15), namely those based on individual performance (Snell and Dean, 1994; Lloyd and Newell, 2000; Kerrin and Oliver, 2002), there is limited prescriptions on the types of payment systems best suited for teamworking activities (see Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). At the very least, the reward systems should result in team members perceiving they are fairly rewarded for their efforts. Appraisals will need to reinforce the team ethos and feed into other aspects of the HR system, such as training.

The second HR area highlighted by Procter and Mueller (2000) is training and development. As noted by Currie and Procter (2003) organisations may be eager to reap what they see as the benefits of teamworking, however they appear to be less willing to consider the costs associated with training team members (Dunphy and Bryant, 1996). Certainly, the consequences of neglecting training and development activities have been demonstrated in a number of studies (Mueller and Purcell, 1992; Harvey and von Behr, 1994; Lloyd and Newell, 2000). Training could be in a number of areas. For example, 'soft skills' like communication and negotiation are likely to be more important; while task-based skills based around independencies will also be important. Training is a main consideration in STS design.

The third contextual area considered by Procter and Mueller (2000) is that of industrial relations, which they state is 'too often glossed over' (p.16). Securing union co-operation with organisational change is thought to be vital for promoting employee acceptance of teamworking (Martinez Lucio et al., 2000). Nevertheless, industrial relations is largely a neglected area of teamworking research, possibly due to the assumed resistance any form of reorganisation would meet from unions; a myopic view according to some commentators (Ackers et al., 1996; Bacon and Storey, 1996). In fact, there is evidence of successful partnerships between management and unions (Kochan and Osterman, 1994). On this basis the industrial relations climate should at least be considered as part of the context in which teamworking initiatives are introduced.

Finally, Procter and Mueller (2000) argue that researchers should consider the organisation's culture in which teamworking is being introduced when evaluating the effectiveness of teams. This 'normative' aspect of teamworking (Procter and Mueller, 2000: 17) is thought to require a change in management and employee attitudes and behaviours. For instance, Mueller (1994: 389) states that one of the motives managers have for introducing teams is to improve the company's culture: 'the hope is to move closer towards a climate of trust and commitment, where employees identify with the objectives of the company'. According to the Industrial Society (1995), cultural change would necessitate a shift from a command and control style of management towards a participative and involved style – a view that, according to Sinclair (1992) has been uncritically embraced by scholars. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that such a transformation has occurred, in that the role of supervisor has changed from the traditional 'directive' role to one of 'facilitator' and 'support' (see for instance Peters, 1987; Wickens, 1987; Procter and Currie, 2004). In contrast, Buchanan and Preston (1992: 60) reported that even though their case study organisation encouraged 'a change in management style, to a more open, communicative, participative approach' in reality this had not occurred. For instance, within three months of the company introducing the programme of change, foremen had resorted back to their traditional command and control roles. Thus the transformation from 'policeman' to 'coach' had not been achieved due, in part, to the lack of senior management support (Buchanan and Preston, 1992: 70). Similar findings were also reported by Procter et al., (1995) and Whybrow and Parker (2000). These findings reinforce the view that researchers should be careful to differentiate between organisational 'rhetoric' and the 'reality' as experienced by workers.

The HR perspective of teams leads to the five research question for the empirical component of the thesis: *To what extent does HRM support teamworking activities?* This question will explore issues around the impact of HR strategy on organisational change, the influence of the HR department in team activities and the degree to which line managers take HR issues seriously.

#### **4.3.6 Summary of research questions**

The major challenges for researching teams today are: the flexibility of the concepts and associated linguistic/substantive ambiguity; the difficulty in researching at

different levels of analysis, particularly in gaining access to the workplace level; and the connection between team concepts in different organisational contexts. Research within the teamworking literature has been weakened by internal disputes about the 'issue of autonomy' and distracted by needless concerns about reconciling team traditions and finding a 'theory of everything'. This has meant less attention has been paid to the fundamental issue of observing teamworking in contemporary work settings. In particular, conducting detailed empirical studies that describe the main variables of teamworking in different research contexts. For example, public sector services have received very little empirical attention.

The challenge of conducting team research has been taken forward by five research questions in the study. These are summarised as: 1) What is the motivation for senior managers introducing teamworking initiatives? 2) How do employees experience working in teams? 3) To what extent are specific team approaches in organisations clear applications of one of the two team traditions? 4) How does teamworking affect decision making? 5) To what extent does HRM support teamworking activities? Before we start to provide evidence to answer these questions we will consider research philosophy and design.

## CHAPTER 5

## Research Philosophy

### 5.1 Introduction

This Chapter will turn attention to the philosophical underpinnings of management research. As an academic discipline based on understanding and explaining social behaviour in work organisations it depends on the philosophical frameworks of social science. More generally, it shares the central tenets of all scientific research; namely, to understand the world through diligent questioning, collection of evidence and theory development. The chapter will: first, consider the features of scientific investigation and where social science stands within this movement. Second, we will consider some of traditional approaches to social philosophy; namely positivism and interpretivism. I will review the central features and critique. Third, I will introduce some alternative philosophical perspectives including anti-realism and critical realism, along with their relative merits. Finally, I will outline the adopted perspective for this research. As a caveat to this section, philosophical discussions are intrinsically abstract. Reviewing the literature for consensus is impossible – authors operationalize their own take on the concepts and combine labels in persistently flexible ways. The following discussion should therefore be seen as an attempt to succinctly examine this literature, albeit in a highly selective fashion.

### 5.2 Scientific Investigation

In his popular text, *What is this thing Called Science?* philosopher A.F. Chalmers (1999: ix-xx) opens with the following reflection:

Science is highly esteemed. Apparently it is a widely held belief that there is something special about science and its methods. The naming of some claim or line of reasoning or piece of research “scientific” is done in a way that is intended to imply some kind of merit or special kind of reliability. But what, if anything, is so special about science?

In response to Chalmers’ question I would make several points. First, while the exact definition of science and what it entails may be contested ad nauseam, the aim of investigation and the form of knowledge constituting science is considered

significantly different to that of general speculation, mythology or artistic expression. My attempt at describing science runs as follows: there are many features of the world which appear to be stable across time and space and science aims to measure what these things are, how consistent they are, and how consistent they might be in the future. In other words, science asks questions about the world and expects to find truthful answers; truth depending on what kinds of things do, or could, exist. John Barrow (2006) perhaps sums it up more elegantly: 'science is only possible because there are limits to what is possible.' Second, science is special because it reflects on how we might attempt to answer our questions: how can we form the knowledge to provide us with answers? Some appeal to the senses and experience as the prime source of knowledge while others emphasise the role of theory, reason and language. However, in all approaches, the epistemology used to obtain knowledge is held to be vitally important.

Over the last four hundred years there have been many different approaches to scientific investigation. Conventionally a 'natural-social' divide is drawn. Like C.P. Snow's 'two cultures' of science versus humanities, one could view science as housing a further two cultures. The last century has witnessed recurring animosity between the 'natural' and 'social' camps; as one argues that the other is not 'scientific'; the other argues that the former is conceited 'scientism'. My journey through the philosophical literature repeatedly led me into this frontier territory. The *logical positivist* movement of the twentieth century stands in my mind as providing the most hostile standoff.

The problem with science here is also its strength – the incredible expansion of widely varied disciplines yet extremely specialist topics of investigation have produced many different kinds of science. Practical limitations make individual scientists or research groups experts in their tiny piece of the world, yet largely ignorant of other scientific disciplines. This has led to a caricaturing of science. For example, physics is frequently identified as the model scientific discipline. Its longstanding successful creation of reliable knowledge and precipitation of technological applications has placed physics at the throne of science. However, physics is simply science at particular levels of analysis. This happens to be the very smallest scale of analysis - like sub-atomic particles - and the very largest scale - such as solar systems and

galaxies. The success in these two areas led to the belief that physics was capable of explaining everything else in-between. Of course, it is not. Thus, there are many types of science which share little in common but in the pursuit of measuring the world. Comparing the knowledge and procedures of cosmology, optics, geology, botany, genetics, palaeontology, and evolutionary biology, for example, will reveal a huge range of differences. This is before we consider the unique challenges of ‘social’ science. My reading of the issues leads me to argue that science must be true to the nature of the topic under investigation and not be distracted by shallow caricatures. Other scientific disciplines serve as a source of useful ideas about research but not as a determining framework for investigation. There are various features of social scientific disciplines which set them apart from the physical sciences. Social science works at a level of analysis where the researcher is part of the apparatus under investigation. Because human beings stand as the most complex outcome of nature, they are the most difficult to explain. Furthermore, because human beings have ethical views about themselves and other people, social researchers cannot investigate social phenomena in the same way as inanimate physical objects like rocks. This leads to specific challenges for social science that we might call ‘naturalistic’ or ethical.

In response to Chalmers’ initial question, scientific knowledge is a special kind of knowledge. This is because science is based on asking questions about highly specific parts of the world and forming answers that are true to the nature of the investigation. We may argue about which subjects in science are most useful or interesting, however it is futile to argue about which subjects are most ‘scientific’, as the term has no overarching meaning.

## **5.3 Philosophies of Social Science**

### **5.3.1 The positive science debate**

In the mid decades of the nineteenth century, the status of social enquiry as an empirical science became a matter of passionate debate. At this time, the emerging social sciences were struggling for recognition and were regarded by many physical scientists as ‘unscientific’ (Benton and Craib, 2001). In reaction, the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1855) coined the terms ‘positivism’ and ‘sociology’ in an attempt to apply the Scientific Method to social science (see Keat and Urry, 1975).

Comte followed a strict form of empiricism and sought to advance the project of 'positive knowledge' by distinguishing this kind of dependable empirical knowledge from claims made by theology and philosophy. He divided history of knowledge into three stages – the theological, metaphysical and scientific. Scientific knowledge was characterised as promoting objectivity, causal understanding, and law-like relationships among variables. Comte wanted to promote the study of human behaviour to the scientific maturity of physics and chemistry and saw the new science - sociology - as the last and the greatest of all sciences that would integrate the findings of other disciplines into a single cohesive picture of society and the world (Hollis, 2002).

Bryman (2001) notes that the doctrine of positivism is extremely difficult to pin down because it has been used in many different ways since Comte. Today it largely carries pejorative connotations in social science and therefore its meaning has become obscured (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). According to a number of sources, the general tenets may include: a) physical science, in terms of the logic of the experiment and quantitatively measured variables, as the model for social research; b) an insistence that statements or hypotheses are testable and amenable to being verified, confirmed, or falsified, by the empirical observation of reality; c) the belief that science rests on specific results that are dissociated from the personality and social position of the investigator and phenomena are therefore consistently measurable across observers; d) the statement of regularities in the form of general laws or statistically probable relationships; e) the belief that science can sometimes incorporate new ideas that are discontinuous from older ones (see Hollis, 2002; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Bohman, 1991).

Central to positivism is a particular conception of Scientific Method and logic, modelled on the physical sciences (points a - c above). The process is based on gathering background data; generalising through induction; forming generalised hypotheses; and then testing these deductively through new observations. This process has become known as the *deductive-nomological* or *hypothetico-deductive* method. A sharp distinction is made between the context of discovery and the context of justification (Reichenbach, 1951). The important feature of theory is that it is open to testing through the testing of discrete variables. When such explicit and standardized



procedures are not employed, as in participant observation, it is seen as impossible to know how to interpret the response since one has no idea what they are responses to. In short, it is only through the statistical and physical control of variables and their rigorous measurement, that, positivists argue, science is able to produce a body of knowledge whose validity is conclusive (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

The opponents of positivism contend that the doctrine represents a strong form of 'scientism' – the hubris that science no longer represents just 'one form of possible knowledge, but rather we must identify knowledge with [a particular kind of] science.' (Schwandt, 1998, p. 4) One consequence of this kind of view is that once reliable social scientific knowledge has been established, it will be possible to control social phenomena and undertake 'social engineering'. A problem which positivists face, similar to any strong form of empiricism, is how to deal with unobservable phenomena or how to resolve theoretical/value conflicts which cannot be tested empirically. These are prevalent in the social world. It is systematic disparity of interpretation between two theoretical positions that is the most challenging. The positivist will argue that we simply need to wait for more evidence to clarify the situation. However, this evidence is not always forthcoming. In particular, the kind of evidence that is favoured is that of experimentally controlled data. However, it is not possible to gain this kind of evidence in many disciplines, natural and social.

### **5.3.2 Anti-positivism: interpretive approaches**

Positive science and the extension of the Scientific Method to the domain of human social life has been heavily criticised by social scientists. Anti-positivists claim that there are fundamental differences between social life and the 'facts of nature' which are the subject matter of the physical sciences. Bryman (2001) notes:

Interpretivism is a term given to a contrasting epistemology to positivism. The term subsumes the views of writers who have been critical of the application of the scientific model to the study of the social world and who have been influenced by different intellectual traditions. (p. 12-13)

The most distinctive feature highlighted in interpretivism, and the sometimes related doctrines of hermeneutics and social constructionism, is that human beings possess a property known as self-consciousness. That is, they are aware of their own existence and are able to reflect on situations and relationships. They possess an 'internal logic'

and mental faculty that no other system in nature appears to hold. Rather than their behaviour representing a surface layer of stimuli-response, such as the case with electrons or chemical bonds, human life has a fundamentally non-material quality of reflection, meaning and symbolic communication (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In short, interpretivists argue that this makes human behaviour more difficult to explain and considerably less predictable: rather than laws and rules determining behaviour, people have a choice whether to obey or not. The upshot is that interpretivists and constructionists 'share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those that live in it' (Schwandt, 1998: 221).

### *Weber's Interpretivism*

Max Weber is perhaps the most influential interpretivist. According to Weber, unlike the natural sciences, sociology does not construct a new conceptual language in its analysis – it works with ordinary common-sense statements and language. Weber (1969) calls this form of understanding the 'states of mind' of the actors concerned. Weber (1969) provides a classic distinction between explanation and understanding in the book, *Economy and Society*, using the concept of *Verstehen* (German for understanding). He held that social inquiry is about understanding 'social action' - 'action' here includes 'all human action when and in so far as the acting individual attaches subjective meaning to it' (p. 32). 'Social Action', then, is action 'which takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby orientated in its course.' (p. 56) Weber distinguished two main kinds of *Verstehen*: 'direct observational understanding', in which the purpose or meaning of human action is immediately apparent (e.g. someone standing moving their arm from side to side) and 'explanatory understanding' that required grasping the motivation for human behaviour by placing the action in some intelligible context of meaning (e.g. waving a friend goodbye). Weber did not consider there to be a clear dividing line between behaviour and meaningful action, but both merged into one another along a continuum. However, Weber did argue that human action is both amenable to, and indeed needs, an interpretation in terms of the subjective meaning that actors attach to their behaviour. This can be done 'historically' where we identify a specific motive that is an outcome of some social situation; it can be done 'sociologically', where we identify a common phenomenon and understand the particular case as an example; or it can be done

‘ideal-typically’ where we analyse the action with the aid of an ideal type theory (Hollis, 2002).

Weber had a deep concern with human ‘meaning’. However he saw this as an ambiguous word and preferred the idea of ‘rationality’ (Hollis, 2002). He believed that the instrument of rationality permits social scientists to ‘accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals’ (Weber, 1968: 15). He made use of four ‘ideal-types’ of rational action, namely: 1) ‘instrumental’ rationality – the most effective means to an end; 2) ‘value-rational’ action – where an implicit value or worldview priorities action; 3) ‘traditional’ action – behaviour that is valid through convention or routine; and 4) ‘affective’ action – that which meets basic needs and desires.

Instrumental rationality is perhaps the most commonly invoked form and is an essential concept for rational-choice theory in economics. In practice, however, Weber argued that human action is a mixture of different forms of rationality (Hollis, 2002). From the central focus on individual rationality, Weber can be described as an *ontological individualist* or *methodological individualist*. He stated, ‘In sociological work collectives must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organisation of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action (Weber, 1968: 13). It followed that if social science studied a different kind of object to natural science, then it required a different methodology. Weber used *Verstehen* to characterise a method which focused solely on understanding the symbolic logical system and culture that individuals attach meaning to. Even if causal general laws were possible they were seen as irrelevant to the purpose of *Verstehen* (Weber, 1949). Social objects, such as institutions or states, do not exist according to the methodological individualist but they should be studied if individuals believe they exist (Benton and Craib, 2001).

Hollis (2002) concludes that ‘Weber’s approach is a suggestive but uneasy blend of elements, each of which, taken separately, bears plausibly on the analysis of rational action, but which, taken together, leave it obscure where we are’ (p. 150). To be instrumentally rational clearly means to calculate according to desires and beliefs, yet

the other forms of rationality are harder to make use of analytically. If an individual is not acting according to some self-centred calculation then they could be acting according to some form of external rule (Hollis, 2002). The hermeneutic imperative is to understand action from 'within'. The discussion above implied, from the individualist perspective, that 'within' was inside the mind of each acting individual. However, this could equally mean 'within' the rules which give it meaning (Hollis, 2002). An important distinction here is between what an action *means* intersubjectively (i.e. between or among individuals) and what the individual actor *means* by it (i.e. what are they trying to convey, achieve, etc.). Hollis (2002) argues that 'If we follow Weber in stressing subjective meanings and are liberal with intersubjective charity, most or even all action will come out as subjectively rational from the agent's point of view. This gloss hardly seems to help the thesis that understanding differs from explanation'. (p. 158) In other words, rationality purely from the point of view of individuals can become pretty mechanical and therefore a process explanation. As Hollis indicates, the other way of glossing meaning as rationality is to place social action within a context of norms, rules and institutions.

### *Wittgenstein and games*

At the opposite extreme from individual rationality, Wittgenstein (1953) provided an interesting analogy between language and games within a 'radical' constructionist framework. Under this view, rules of language define a 'game' that would not exist without them. There are two main types of rules here: *constitutive*, which create the game by providing a purpose; and *regulative*, which govern choice by stating what should and should not be done within the game. If one breaks the regulative rules, one is playing the game badly; if one does not follow the constitutive rules, one is not playing at all. Wittgenstein argued that in learning the rules of the game one is learning 'how to go on'. The suggestion is that particular actions belong to particular practices, which are embedded within the wider practices which go to make up a culture. To understand a particular action fully, we may need to grasp the wider context and see how broad collective ideas of what matters for the proper conduct of life contribute to the sense of how to go on in particular situations. This approach is therefore holistic, as opposed to individualistic. Peter Winch (1958) uses Wittgenstein's work to argue that rules of action are not ideas about reality from the outside but are the constituents of reality. Our view of the world is dependent on the

rules of the 'game' which we happen to find ourselves playing, whether it is physics, sociology or public management. In Winch's (1958) words, 'Social relations are expressions of ideas about reality' (p. 23) and 'All behaviour which is meaningful is *eo ipso* rule-governed' (p. 52). This view of 'games' can lead to a highly idealistic and relativistic approach, where there is nothing independent and shared among different 'forms of life' (Hollis, 2002).

Interpretive approaches depend on 'understanding' as the main purpose of enquiry. Whereas explanation suggests an external structure of causation, understanding places all its faith in the internal structure of meaning. Games, on the other hand, occupy a middle ground – they are *internal* to the players *collectively*. They are external to each but internal to all – 'intersubjective, rather than objective, you might say' (Hollis, 2002: 159). Games, we might think are historically and culturally specific, with a real enough power to set the terms in which people think and relate but only in their own place and time. An ontology whose primary elements are intersubjective contrasts to an ontology of objective wholes independent of human consciousness (as with holism/structuralism), and with ones whose primary elements are subjectively motivated individual actions (as with individualism). Methodologically, the intersubjective route to understanding is to identify the constitutive and regulative rules of the relevant 'game' (institution, practice, 'form of life'). Wittgenstein's approach places the rules of the game all-important and places the individual players as simply obedient rule followers.

The previous sections considered players as rule-followers but obedient rule followers need not be mechanical rule-followers in the way that Wittgenstein suggests. Indeed they cannot be so because rules based on language are intrinsically open-ended, subject to interpretation and in effect constructed in the course of applying them. Even a single rule is prone to be indeterminate, because it cannot be scripted for all circumstances and needs a kind of interpretation which involves deciding what it will be taken to mean. They have a power to interpret individually and, still more, collectively, which is a power to construct. The effect is to set actors at a useful distance from rules, which nevertheless remain vital for understanding what is done under their aegis (Hollis, 2002).

### 5.3.3 Anti-realism

As we saw earlier, anti-positivists are deeply incredulous and resistant to 'naïve' forms of scientific realism that treat empirical observations as 'all there is' in the world. 'Anti-realism' can be described as enlarging this perspective to a fundamental disbelief in realist ontology altogether. This includes approaches labelled 'postmodernist/poststructuralist' and also 'strong' forms of constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1994). The movement towards anti-realist perspectives is often depicted as the 'linguistic turn' in social science (Clarke, 2004).

The general argument of anti-realism runs as follows: how can language, of any kind, including scientific knowledge, engage with, or hook onto, the world? The answer, its followers conclude, is that we have no way of coming face to face with reality to 'read off' facts about it. We are therefore trapped within language and cannot break out of it to describe reality 'directly' in a way that is independent of our theories. Reality is therefore a total construction of language in the form of discourse and 'text'. Chalmers (1999) uses the somewhat derogatory label for this belief as 'global anti-realism' and with characteristic brusqueness suggests:

There are few true empiricists these days who believe that we can come face to face with reality and directly read off facts about it. So in this sense we are all global anti-realists, but that is not saying much because it is such a weak thesis. (p. 43)

Chalmers makes use of the 'correspondence theory of truth' to try to get around the ostensibly insoluble problem of language. He suggests that constructed statements can reflect 'the world' in the same way that a map of Australia can reflect the land mass known as 'Australia'. Just because all that you have is a map of Australia in your hand doesn't mean that there isn't something else called 'Australia' that the map is based on. On the contrary, it makes the existence of an independent land mass known as Australia more likely. However, just as a map always has its limitations in revealing the features of a piece of land, science can only attempt to describe *what is* based on its instruments, not determine *what is* (which for practical reasons is impossible). We cannot determine that our map of Australia is *Australia* because such a claim is meaningless.

An intrinsic weakness of the anti-realist perspective is that it presupposes language (Searle, 2005). It does not consider any possible antecedents to language or how language depends on an independent world for its functioning; it is only concerned with how language creates the world. However, language is only possible by using the human senses – we hear (listen), see (read) or feel (e.g. brail) language. Knowledge claims of human anatomy and physiology from an evolutionary perspective suggest that our senses evolved to the world around them. In other words, we can see because there is something out there to see; we can hear because the world is noisy; we can feel because the world is lumpy. Human beings have not evolved omniscient or ‘perfect’ senses to the world around them. We cannot see with as much magnification as is possible, for example, yet we can see in a wide spectrum of colour. While dogs are colour-blind and have limited sight their sense of smell is considerably more advanced than our and accordingly we could say they can affectively smell in ‘colour’; Bats, on the other hand, can affectively hear in ‘colour’ through sonar. We can do neither of these things but have designed instruments, such as microscopes and radar systems, to carry out similar functions. The point is that language is not simply an indiscriminate flowing body like water that forms currents and coalesces around certain subjectivities and discourses. It is understandable how commentators view it that way because there is so much language out there. But, in fact, it is contained within human receptacles and constrained by the senses. The senses are in turn constrained by the evolution of the anatomy in response to the external world. The ‘gap’ between the map and land mass, or the world and the senses, has been called the difference between the platonic and the empirical world by some physical scientists. Other perspectives have called it the difference between the ‘generative mechanisms’ of reality and the ‘surface’ level of observations.

#### **5.3.4 Critical Realism**

Critical Realism (CR) emerged from the growing dissatisfaction with the inherent explanatory limitations of postmodernism and social constructionism (Reed, 2005). In recent years, it has grown in popularity and influence within social scientific debate (Archer, 2003). It can be seen to have formally developed from Bhaskar’s (1975) *Realist Theory of Science*. It is realist in ontology, accepting the independent existence of the world. Bhaskar states that both individuals and social structures are real levels but independent and interacting with one another. CR also supports the

Enlightenment's optimism of human self-emancipation through scientific progress. Critical realism differs from other forms of empirical realism by regarding the surface appearance of objects/phenomena as potentially misleading of their underlying character. Instead, 'depth realism' is offered as a way to get beyond simple observations. There are argued to be three levels of reality: first, the 'real' world of mechanisms, tendencies, and so on which science seeks to discover; second, the 'actual' level of flows, sequences or events which may be produced under experimental conditions, or occur in more complex and less predictable 'conjunctions'; and third, the 'empirical' level of observed events, which must necessarily be only a small subset of the 'actual' level.

Bhaskar draws contrasts between a conception of natural and social science. He suggests that social structures are maintained in existence only through the activities of agents (activity-dependent) unlike natural phenomena; he believes that social structures are concept-dependent in that they are represented by actors in virtue of their beliefs - this is said not to be the case in nature; finally he believes social structures are only relatively enduring unlike structures in nature. Collier (1994) and Benton (1981) have argued that Bhaskar makes too strong a contrast between natural and social reality. He seems to use a caricature of science via physics that I warned against earlier. Benton (1981) suggests that social science shares many similarities with biological sciences such as the relatively temporary nature of phenomena.

CR draws on a particular form of logic known as *retroduction* (or abduction). Metaphors are central to this process. Theory can be built up through a three-stage process: first, collection of evidence about patterns of observable phenomena; second, questioning: 'what underlying structures or mechanisms would, if they existed, explain this pattern? Metaphors are useful here; third, conducting further experiments and observations on the hypothetical assumption that the mechanism on the basis of the metaphor really does exist. Lawson (1997: 24) explains this process illustratively:

If deduction is illustrated by the move from the particular observation of numerous black ravens to the general claim that 'all ravens are black', and induction by the move from the particular observation of numerous black ravens to the general claim that 'all ravens are black', retroductive or abductive reasoning is indicated by a move from the observation of numerous black ravens to a theory of a mechanism intrinsic... to ravens which dispose them to be black.



Rather than forming predictions about future phenomena, CR is mainly historically focussed on ‘causal-explanation’. Fleetwood and Hesketh (2006) offer the term ‘tendential prediction’ as an aim but this is very different from a Humean ‘symmetry of explanation’. Rather than explaining the general law-like relationship between variables within a population, CR takes an approximation to the population and works backwards to attempt to find its ‘generative mechanisms’. While not explicitly within a CR perspective, Chalmers (1999) demonstrates similar ideas by suggesting that the world is ‘active’ and that all phenomena have underlying ‘powers, tendencies and dispositions’. When tendencies are empirically observed they are ‘triggered’ through ‘efficient’ or ‘complex’ causation. In social science, the underlying generative mechanisms are presumably an outcome of some relatively stable *human nature* which produces tendencies in social interactions through cumulative: genetic, metabolic, anatomical, cognitive, intentional, conditioned, and normative processes. We are a long way from having a good understanding of the relationships among these levels of analysis.

Constructionists have criticised CR perspectives on a number of grounds. Willmott and Comtu (2005) provide a response to Reed (2005) but also a general critique of CR. They ask two basic questions: first, ‘how do you know that this is the way the world is?’ and second, ‘what is ‘science’?’ Behind both these questions is a basic constructionist anxiety discussed earlier in relation to anti-realism. This is the worry that, due to the socially constructed basis of all knowledge, how can scientific knowledge be privileged? They are unimpressed by the ‘intelligibility’ and reliability of experimental demonstrations. For Willmott and Comtu, it is unconvincing that some observations are especially reliable, even if through careful observation they happen *every time* in particular circumstances. Instead they prefer to emphasize that

...discourses (including the ones of different scientific communities) ‘fail’, and, in this respect, they are not-all. [They] recurrently strive to touch or capture some (impossible) kernel but are repeatedly frustrated. Tripped up and dislocated, the moment of capture eludes them.’ (p. 1651)

Thus, for strong social constructionists (if Willmott and Comtu are representatives of this tradition) the glass is always half empty. This moves beyond the respectable skepticism of science as ‘fallibilist’ under-labourer. It displays a constant anxiety that the reliability of all scientific discourse will inevitably fail:

'Reality' is constructed as there is no objective, grounding point outside of the social constructions of reality. ...there is no escaping the signifier, as the predicate of 'reality is...' (whatever the research strategy or reasoning for establishing the predicate), is a signifier. This predicate will require other signifiers to be explained, which will require other signifiers, and others and so on (p. 1656)

Rather than being willing to work with what we have, albeit socially constructed signifiers, and attempt to approach the deep reality of nature through language via the senses, the constructionists are too concerned about where the other half of the drink is (and why is it is half empty) to take a sip. They prefer only to trust the existence of the signifier of the signifier of the signifiers...and not what they are signifying. Of course, we could turn the problem on its head and ask why should we believe in the existence of signifiers at all? We could, for example, introduce the problem of 'other minds'. Yet this will get us nowhere. Isaac Newton once reflected, 'I seem to have been like a small child playing at the seaside ...while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me'. The social constructionists, then, have decided to get their feet wet and take a paddle in the big ocean of discourse rather than take the speedboat of empirical discovery.

While I admire the CR approach for its impatience of anti-realism and its progressive stance, there are several limitations to the perspective from my current reading of the topic. First, it is not clear which is the more important focus – the surface empirical observations that we have access to and shape our experiences or the underlying levels of reality below this. How do we know when we have observed something which would benefit from a retroductive analysis? Do we first operationalize the phenomena which are, for example, most common using inductive logic? Or do we select the important observations from a moral framework? This is not clear to me. Second, CR raises considerable practical problems for studying social phenomena. Reed (2005) suggests that 'realist-based research on organisation and management must begin with an in-depth and intensive historical and structural analysis of pre-existing institutional forms ...the painstaking detail of each historical case' (p. 1639). This presents considerable empirical challenges. Most social scientific research programmes last between one and three years and are based predominately on semi-structured interviews. It is doubtful how far one-hour interviews can reach into the 'painstaking detail' of historical cases. Furthermore, respondents' ability to

reconstruct events that happened some time ago is severely questionable. The most appropriate approach, then, seems to be long-term (i.e. several years at least) observational work combined with interviewing and other techniques. Whether this would be possible within the contemporary academic climate remains to be seen. Thus, the crisis of data is an important issue. While, this may not be a critique of the underlying validity of CR construct, it is questioning its usefulness for empirical management research.

#### **5.4 Adopted perspective**

Following the review of social scientific philosophies, I will now set out the chosen perspective for the thesis. First, there is the issue of ontology (what is). The most pertinent issue being 'is there something out there?' My answer is simply: yes! Human societies have progressed most with a realist (modernist) view of the world. As Barrow (2006) said, 'there are limits to what is possible'. Realist ontology presupposes what the world exists beyond our knowing of it, yet it is fundamentally *knowable*. The purpose of science is to discover the knowable parts by measuring patterns in the world. At a simple level, it is possible to compress observations into theories, for example, the series of digits '0101010101' can be compressed through logic into '01' without losing the series pattern (Barrow, 2006). Likewise, a management meeting which is scheduled as a weekly event can be compressed into a theory of a routine, and not seen as a random set of events. Our challenge as social researchers is to carry out this kind of compression or measurement as efficiently, yet as richly, as possible. Richness is important because human behaviour is fundamentally about expression. Thus, social science is concerned with the measurement of expression. The potential for understanding depends on the validity of the end concepts (McIntyre, 1994). Therefore, I reject anti-realist approaches here.

Weber attempted to place understanding of individual subjective intentions as the purpose of social enquiry. However, in this he missed the crucial structural, normative and political features of social reality. His typology of different forms of rationality is helpful to consider different types of actor thoughts, but is only a partial analysis of social phenomena. As Hollis (2002) suggests, the distinction between explanation and understanding is not very convincing. *Verstehen* simply becomes another level of

analysis placed within an explanatory framework (i.e. he explains human understanding through rationality). Interpretive perspectives often overlook the implications of social reality being observer-relative (also known as 'intersubjective') (Searle, 2005). Wittgenstein's games helped us to appreciate intersubjectivity; if games provide rules for multiple actors but in a flexible enough way to allow individual agency, then this can help explain the foundations of structure-agency. Searle notes: 'observer relativity implies ontological subjectivity but ontological subjectivity does not preclude epistemic objectivity.' For example, 'Gordon Brown was the Prime Minister of UK during the Summer of 2007' has high epistemic objectivity. It is our challenge to develop social insights which are as epistemologically objective as possible. It is important to simultaneously consider the subjective and the objective.

My adopted perspective is perhaps closest to Critical Realism. Through a conception of social reality as multilayered and active, it is possible to approach highly complex phenomena with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus. Simplified positivist models cannot deal effectively with the transience, yet deep structure of social worlds. Social events/rules are deeply imbued with human (collective) memories that act as conditioning and normative forces on behaviour. However, individual actors must constantly reinterpret and negotiate new meanings to rules which lead to the emergence of new behaviours. Both of these processes are mediated by material artefacts/resources such as the human body, food, buildings and technology. This level of analysis has been called the 'generous zone' which is of 'strategic explanatory relevance' for management research because this is where agency and structure interact most pervasively. Reed (2005) quotes Parker (2000: 120):

This 'generous zone' ... is where collectivization happens, as groups, corporate agents, networks, cultural traditions, institutions, hierarchies, games, alliances, stratification systems and struggles over the status quo are initiated, acquire their conditioning force, are maintained and transformed by agents. It is the zone of the relatively deep temporality of events and sequences where structures and agents interact, the zone of multiple tendencies and limited predictability, between randomness and inevitability.

It is the 'generous zone' that this research is most interested in through the theory of teamworking. This perspective will be carried through in the research design and data collection stages of the project. For example, the notion of layered reality will inform

an approach which seeks to discover phenomena at the levels of individual perceptions, group structures and wider organisational structures. This will necessitate a flexible methodology which can generate data by talking to people but also listening to people interacting in teams and recording behaviours at the team level. Furthermore, when discovering patterns in the data, CR will inform the process of analysis and inference. Rather than simply summarising the interpretations of individuals acting at the surface layer of organisational reality, the analysis will seek to relate patterns in the data to underlying tendencies, forces or mechanisms which underlie surface observations. We will next turn attention to the detail of methodological strategy.

## CHAPTER 6

## Research Design

### 6.1 Introduction

The following sections will turn attention to the more practical issues of the research programme. This includes research design, methods selection, and research process. Research design is a combination of initial hopes and intentions, practical constraints and unexpected challenges along the way. The chapter will set out what choices were identified and how they were tackled.

### 6.2 Developing a research programme

The body of literature and history of research progress within a particular discipline serve as the starting point for new research programmes. The relevant literatures in teamworking were reviewed in chapters two to four. By reviewing the process adopted by other academics in the field, relevant choices can be quickly identified. The main issues include the purpose of the study, output aims, and criteria for success. Methodology is a main choice in bridging these issues. Some researchers prefer to distil their questions into psychometric scales in the form of surveys, where they perform statistical tests and diagnostics among discrete variables. Others prefer to maintain a more open qualitative approach and are keen to maximise the generation of rhetorical, dialogical and behavioural data through some kind of observation and/or interviews. Others still, combine these two kinds of enquiry in a multi-method approach. While it is straightforward to identify the variety of approaches, it is often more difficult to see how or why researchers have chosen to adopt particular methods. At one level, there seems to be geographic traditions in which particular methods predominate. March (2007: 14) notes:

Organisational scholarship developed at different times in the USA and Europe. [...] USA scholarship expanded rapidly during the 1950s. The general hope of Organisation studies at this time were mathematical models in psychology, political science, economics and sociology and the progress of science; to make human behaviour and institutions more scientific and an attempt to make business schools more 'academic'. This was very different in Europe where post-war recover was slower. They started to expand rapidly during the 70s and 80s. Whereas the USA had developed during a 'scientific'

intellectual mood, European organisational scholarship developed during a period of protest and counterculture movements (e.g. feminism, Marxist critiques, post-structuralism, post-modernism and social constructionism). The European mood has substantially less positive attitudes towards the academic establishment, business, about science and mathematics.

Roughly, it could be said that statistical approaches dominate in the USA and parts of Western Europe such as Germany, whereas qualitative approaches are favoured in the UK and Australia. These preferences may reflect intellectual/institutional traditions, assumptions or fashions. However, at another level there must be some explicit justification for the specificity of a particular methodology in every research programme. Research questions may be suited to some approaches more than others. I offer both of these levels as relevant for my research decision; however the latter must surely take primacy.

Through my reading of the literature, the process of uncovering philosophical assumptions outlined earlier, and my general inclinations as a social enquirer, the research programme quickly adopted a more qualitative stance. That is, an approach that would not follow a strict 'top-down' process in which: research objectives were acquired and clearly articulated; neatly leading to precise research hypotheses; leading to philosophical assumptions; then methodological process; then data production; and finally analysis. While this may have been an expedient approach to obtain a doctorate, it didn't appear the most relevant or interesting process. Instead, it was clear that the process would be considerably more open, flexible and iterative, with research questions being revisited and revised a number of times to reflect the challenges of the social situation. As Weick (2007: 17) suggests, 'We need to accept that the signature of a rich account is often the preservation of disorder and confusion.' In other words, the research process was likely to be 'a bit messy'. Accordingly, my initial conceptualisation of the research was vague. I had not sketched out a nice thesis-sized piece of the world that I was trying to understand. Nor had I fallen into a research group where it was the logical next step for the successive doctoral student to tackle a specific question (that said, the assessed output of student work is always shaped by the criteria and conditions of the accrediting institution and department; the strict 'franchise' of qualifications, as Clough, 2004, calls it).

So what were the guiding principles behind the research? I had developed an interest in management and organisation studies research through undergraduate study, encouragement from peers and teaching staff, and a general picture that the world of work was, for the most part, not a particularly rewarding experience for employees. I will not attempt to rewrite the decision as a moral choice, but I was interested to see how work, which is the most popular pursuit for much of the developed world (at least in terms of time), was experienced in different places and different times. I was interested to investigate how different ways of working seemed to lead to different social and psychological outcomes.

My specific interest in management control and team-based work could, in reminiscent fashion, be said to have emerged from an essay question I was confronted with as an undergraduate. This read something like: ‘To what extent do management control strategies eliminate worker discretion?’ The literature painted a bleak picture: ‘structured antagonism’ between management agents of capitalism and exploited commoditised labour (Marxist labour process theory); an ‘iron cage’ of bureaucratic rules that shape workers into ‘cogs as part of a machine’ (Weberian bureaucratic authority); and ‘panoptical’ surveillance where every minute movement of subordinates are recorded by management instruments such as supervisors, CCTV cameras and computer information systems. Within the dystopian landscape, there was one area which seemed to exhibit hope (at least according to some writers). This was labelled in various forms as ‘post-bureaucratic’ control. It appeared to be a way that workers were given the freedom to somehow manage themselves. This was understood to occur through ‘soft’ interventions such as organisational culture, training, and HRM. One of the main candidates for this form of control was ‘teamworking’. So this is where my initial interest began.

When beginning my doctoral candidature I was asked from time to time about my research and “what my thesis *was*”. The general articulation I picked was something like: “I am interested in teamworking – the way people cooperate at work and the effects this has on individuals and organisations.” This aim was often met with cynicism, bemusement, or patronising tones, “Oh right... good for you!” from people who worked outside of academia. People often followed with anecdotes about their work situation or how they have posters on their office walls preaching ‘Work



smarter, not harder!’ or ‘There is no “I” in team!’ etc, etc. This gave me the impression that ‘teamworking’, ‘teambuilding’ or the ‘team’ ethos were concepts that everyone had seen, been the victim of, and were bored of. It was an overused concept amenable to office jokes and television catchphrases with almost no tangible meaning, apart from the odd “I know, Belbin team roles” or “Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing!” - training course terminology. The ‘hope’ of post-bureaucratic control may not have been so realistic after all.

My reading of the literature and anecdotal experience of how people reacted to the labels of teamwork, made it even clearer that a qualitative approach was needed. It appeared that asking people about teamworking on their terms or with little opportunity for elaboration would be unenlightening. There are various surveys suggesting that ‘teamworking’ is pervasive across industries and sectors but with little elucidation about the phenomena beyond vague definitions. A major research need was therefore to discover how consistent the idea of ‘teamworking’ was in organisations and what the label ‘team’ corresponded to in terms of work routines and processes, management and employee behaviour/attitudes. This approach would necessitate research data regarding what workers were *doing* as well as what they were *saying*. A research approach that included observations of work related behaviour would be desirable. The theoretical notion of teamwork also suggested that an empirical focus on the dynamics and interactions among workers would be required rather than simply asking workers to reflect on their interactions. While these were general reflections about the required research approach, consulting the social research methodology literature would provide a more consistent and thorough discussion of research strategy. These issues will be considered next.

### **6.3 Research strategy**

The previous section commented that a qualitative research approach is likely to be ‘a bit messy’. This provides a temptation to show every practical problem or difficult decision the ‘messy card’ and excuse the researcher of any responsibility for the success of the research process. However, this is clearly a poor argument – the messy card is not a strong hand. Science is always driven by human questions and motivations and is therefore consciously designed. The fact that a qualitative approach

is more open and flexible places if anything more impetus on the researcher to ensure the messiness is eventually tidied up. A messy approach is not an excuse for anything goes; it is merely a response to the openness of the social world and language. As Clough (2004) notes, this can lead to a defensive stance where qualitative research is almost defined as an endless justification of what its terms are. It is a disappointing but valid observation that qualitative work always seems to be on the defensive. I also do not regard a qualitative approach as something closer to the expressions of art, as some authors suggest (e.g. Eisner, 2001). While some artists may purport to reflect nuances, idiosyncrasies and ironies in the world, there is no requirement for art to be about anything. As Kant reflected about beauty in art, there is 'purposiveness without a purpose' (Freeland, 2003). In contrast, I have maintained that science is unambiguously (and purposively) about developing knowledge of the world.

Silverman (2006) provides the following list of criteria for success in qualitative research: 1) are the methods appropriate for the questions? 2) Does the research connect to existing theory? 3) How are cases selected? 4) Are the methods sensitive to the context? 5) Are data collected in a systematic way that is representative of the case? 6) What procedures are adopted for analysis? 7) How are data systematically analysed through codes, themes and concepts? 8) Is there clear distinction between data and interpretation? 9) Is the theoretical stance explicit?

These questions may serve as general pointers or reminders during the research process. It is interesting to note that although Silverman is discussing qualitative methods, and therefore largely rhetorical logic, he brings in notions of mathematical logic with several references to 'systematic', which could be described as something more like the series '12345' rather than '42153'. It is assumed that adopting a more structured pattern of data collection is more likely to reveal patterns in the phenomena under investigation even if the data are qualitative. We will consider these issues in the following discussion. From the list above, existing literature and theory has been considered elsewhere so we will therefore proceed with a consideration of case study design.

### 6.3.1 Selection of cases

Yin (2002) provides the classic discussion of case study design. His prescriptions cover each stage of the research process from clarifying questions; to design quality (e.g. construct validity, external validity and reliability); to case approach (holistic versus embedded); to case 'protocol' and 'replication logic'. The essential argument is that methodological design should reflect the logical research problem and desired output aims. The research process is then seen as an interrogation of competing theoretical propositions against empirical experience. The research area I am interested in - that of teams and teamwork - could in principle be studied at various levels in organisations. Although the use of language denoting certain concepts (i.e. rhetoric) is no guarantee of behavioural/institutional phenomena (i.e. reality), it is all we have to go in when we are outside of the research context. For this reason, cases were selected on the basis that organisational actors (largely management) were claiming to be using 'teamworking' of some kind. While theoretically, the more case studies that can be implemented the better, practically only one or two sites could feasibly be studied under the time constraints of the project.

During the early stages of the research project various local Government authorities were visited as part of other research programmes that I was involved with in some way. These visits were used to provide preliminary insights into the concept of teamworking in the context of local government.<sup>7</sup> Sampson (2004) suggests that a 'pilot' study in qualitative work is useful to gain prior context-specific knowledge that can lead to more thorough design in the main fieldwork stage. These early insights revealed two main findings that would inform the main project. First, that the concept of 'teamworking', as theorised moving from the question 'who says they are using teamwork?' to the organisational phenomena 'What does this look/sound like?' was found not to be a simple unitaristic concept as portrayed in some team research, but instead was a highly diverse set of practices adopted by management to serve a wide range of aims. These included: a means of achieving targets; a way of managing a flexible workforce; cultural practice used in training programmes; core component of 'performance culture'; way of holding meetings; organisational authority structure; and the social group which workers most closely associate themselves with on work

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<sup>7</sup> The findings of these preliminary studies were reported at several conferences, including Gatenby (2005) and Gatenby and Gould-Williams (2006).

and non-work issues. Second, even though there were a variety of versions of teamwork across departments, each of these approaches emerged from initiatives at the corporate (i.e. council) level to reflect the prevailing agenda of senior management. In other words, while each department interpreted and responded to teamworking according to their specific needs and interests, the prevailing logic of teams came from a centralised programme of management strategy and control.

These early findings suggested that an embedded case study approach would be most suitable for the research area (see Yin, 2002). The council as a whole would serve as a useful top level of analysis which could be broken down into a more detailed consideration of directorates, services, offices and teams. The final chosen design would be a single overarching case study which could be broken down into detailed fieldwork of two or more departments. The approach would therefore be embedded and move between different levels of analysis from the individual and team, to the department, to the directorate, and finally the organisation as a whole. This would provide enough data to assess a range of forms of teamwork under a larger organisational team approach. It was hoped that these data would contribute to the theoretical development of teamworking, providing a meticulous and sensitive assessment of team phenomena at various levels in organisations.

### **6.3.2 Methods selection**

What we will refer to here as the 'methods literature' is an interesting group of publications geared to understanding and improving the social research process. Three main types of publications come into play – first, books and student manuals which summarise a range of methodological options or concentrate on a particular strategy of research, such as 'qualitative research'; second, empirical studies where authors employ a particular approach and then reflect on their methodological experience; and third, journal articles that either review the range of views on a particular approach or carry out specific research into a particular method in order to progress the process of methodology. Each of these types of publication combines experience of research process with typologies and prescriptions about how future research should be carried

out. I have focussed on the first and third types from the list above<sup>8</sup>. I have also made use of various resources produced by the *ESRC National Centre for Research Methods* through its range of 'nodes' and 'networks' (see <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk>). Finally, I have gained further methodological advice through conference discussions and workshops; in particular, the workshop *Qualitative research and analysis* at the Academy of Management annual meeting (Honolulu, 2005) was useful in providing a different perspective.

When considering the prescriptions of experienced researchers for use in my own study, I have adopted a learning style which can be described as similar to that of sports coaching. When learning any new sport, say for example platform/springboard diving, there are many new techniques to learn and master which must all be performed simultaneous or in synchronised succession (such as balance and synchrony between the left and right legs/arms, pointed toes, arched back, and still head). However, the main aim for a novice diver may be simply to 'avoid doing a belly flop'. In a similar vein, there are many techniques that the social researcher must attempt to master according to the prescriptions of the methods literature. 'Performing' social research becomes all the more critical as there is little opportunity for practice before the main event. Like the novice diver, my central aim in practically carrying out the research was therefore to 'avoid doing a belly flop' rather than to achieve 'perfection'. One should be wary of those who claim to perform a perfect 'reverse one and a half somersaults with three and a half twists' on their first few attempts in the pool!

I have already made several attempts to clarify my reasoning behind adopting a qualitative research approach and will therefore not take up limited space reviewing the relative merits of quantitative approaches such as those employing strict surveys coupled with statistical analysis. Such discussion can be found in various introductory

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<sup>8</sup> Several of the general methods texts were reviewed to develop a good overview of methodological options. Further reading was then carried out into qualitative methods. To review the journal literature I underwent a search for the main methodological journals through the science citation index and the ESRC qualitative research network (QUALITI). This search revealed the following journals which deal specifically with qualitative methods: *Qualitative Research*, *Qualitative Researcher*, *Organizational Research Methods*, *Sociological Research Online*, and *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. I then browsed each journal from the vol.1 iss.1 to the most recent issue (as of March 2007) for relevance to the study (i.e. ethnographic methods in work organisations). 32 relevant papers were collected. These were then reviewed for theoretical or practical relevance.

methods texts such as Bryman (2001), Saunders et al., (2000) and Gill and Johnson (2002). I have taken a line of reasoning which has embraced a qualitative stance for its positive suitability for the study rather than through a discounting of the unsuitability of other methods; however, some authors, such as Hesketh and Fleetwood (2006), have attacked statistical survey approaches in HRM as representing a naïve empiricist attempt to explain reality, where the phenomena under consideration are considerably more complex and multilayered than assumed. I agree with Hesketh and Fleetwood (2006) in their assumption that a sensitive qualitative approach is more suitable when deploying certain complex research questions.

The qualitative research resource, *Online QDA*, hosted by Huddersfield University lists twenty five different forms of qualitative research, from action research to template analysis (see <http://onlineqda.hud.ac.uk/methodologies.php>). The list includes many perspectives which share theoretical similarities, such as constructionism, hermeneutics and phenomenology; while all of the perspectives share the core 'qualitative' tools of either talking to people, observing people, or a combination of the two. Here I am primarily interested in 'ethnographic' methods which combine interviewing (both formal and informal) with observational fieldwork.

Ethnography is a branch of cultural anthropology and generally concerns itself with producing descriptive accounts of the historical-geographic representation of people and cultures (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Schwandt (2001) notes that while many kinds of qualitative enquiry adopt ethnographic methods (i.e. interviews and observations), not all studies implement ethnographic fieldwork (i.e. 'do ethnography'). By this it is meant that ethnography should, according to its traditional tenets, be about 'writing' culture and 'textualisation' (through 'representation', 'inscription' and 'transcription') as much as adopting methods which collect particular forms of data about cultural phenomena. I have not followed what can be described a traditional interpretivist approach and I therefore do not claim to 'write' culture in line with these doctrines. I do not wish to engage with the issue of 'forms of representation' which with liberal usage can lead to the 'crisis of representation' (Denzin, 1997). Rather, I have made repeated attempts to show how the social world is more than merely rhetoric or discourse and how there is no need to enter weary debates which can lead to something like 'my rhetorical logic is better than your

rhetorical logic'. I also do not use the label 'ethnography' in an attempt to identify myself with any particular group or present any particular methodological agenda (see Koro-Lungberg and Greckhamer, 2005). I draw on the ethnographic literature to the extent that it is a group of methods well-suited to uncovering the interaction of individuals in groups and gaining insights into the rhetorical and behavioural aspects of the world. I am more interested in the routines and routinisation of organisational life than ideas of identity and culture. Instead, I am interested in culture to the extent that it is the sum of contextualised routines within particular historical-social boundaries.

Smith (2001) provides an interesting monograph on the use of ethnography in work organisations. She suggests that there are a wide range of themes in work that ethnographic methods are particularly suited towards, including: autonomy, citizenship, informal relations, environment, change and control. All of these themes involve understanding the complexity of organisational routines, the mundane detail as Silverman (2006) calls it, which provides the main battleground or 'contested terrain' of management authority and concomitant worker attitudes and behaviours (Edwards, 1979). Indeed, Smith (2001: 221) notes,

No single approach to the study of work has been more effective than the ethnographic in uncovering the tacit skills, the decision rules, the complexities, the discretion and the control in jobs that have been labelled routine.

There are several appealing ways of expressing the virtues of the ethnographic approach over alternative methods. Smith (2001) claims 'Ethnographers cannot be accused of being armchair academics who examine the world at arm's length' (p. 220); whereas Robert Part of the famous 1920s Chicago school, provides what could be described as an alternative strap line for the ethnographer: 'Get the seat of your pants dirty in real research' (cited in Silverman, 2006: 74). We will now consider some of the detail and opportunities in using these methodological tools. We will consider interviewing and observation separately as they are often dealt with in the literature.

### *Interviews*

The qualitative research interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people used to collect a wide range of information types (Kahn and Cannel, 1957).

Interviews are inherently informal in nature and are accordingly considered 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984: 102). Nonetheless, semi-structured formats allow the researcher to formulate themes and questions to be covered while retaining methodological flexibility (Spradley, 1979). In comparison to other social research methods, interviews facilitate production of dialogical data that possess richness of detail (Geertz, 1973; Zweig, 1948). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (1991) they present 'the opportunity for the researcher to probe deeply to uncover new clues, open up new dimensions of a problem and to secure vivid, inclusive accounts that are based on personal experience.' (p. 34) The prominence of words, interpretations and experiences of the individual enables literal '[respondent] descriptions ... in their own unvarnished language' (Mayhew, 1951: 3).

Fine (1983) is incredulous of claims that interviews are neutral conversations and argues, instead, that they are really one-way pseudo-conversations, raising ethical issues. Such concerns are echoed by Oakley (1981) who proposes that the techniques and tactics of interviewing are really ways of manipulating respondents while treating them as objects or numbers rather than individual human beings. Consider Cassell's (2005) words:

...we can learn about such things as how to develop rapport, enable our interviewees to feel comfortable enough to talk to us about sensitive data, or, alternatively, stop them from going off the point. (p. 167)

While I appreciate the ethical flag of Fine and Oakley, we are taking ethical concerns quite some distance when we cannot talk to people because we want something from them. There wouldn't be much talking in the world if this was adhered to. Qualitative interviews are favoured when the aim is to ask for reflections about decisions that social actors have taken or when it is necessary to listen to the reasons for their opinions and attitudes (Saunders et al., 2000). They can be used to gain insights into respondent worldviews, embracing past, present and future by accessing biographies, career histories and hopes for the future which the researcher cannot witness by observing (Burgess, 1984).

The context of the interview carries potential advantages for data production. The researcher and research subject engage in face-to-face dialogue which enables a flexible flow of information. This means questions can be developed and adapted for



individual respondents and interviewers can reflect back in order to 'confirm their interpretations and seek elaborations upon the person's account' (May, 2001: 54). The interview context also enables monitoring, and to a certain degree control, of the way data are produced. Nonverbal elements of the interview are an advantage because nonverbal communication, such as body language and physical appearance, provide insights into the tacit aspects of a respondent's disposition (Gorden, 1980). The most significant advantage of the interview context is probably the research depth which can be covered in a relatively short period of time. Robson (1995) observes that asking people directly about situations can be an obvious shortcut in seeking answers to our questions. In addition, set appointments for interviews means that a wide range of people can be met in an efficient way. The option of re-interviewing after analysing the interview makes longitudinal research easier in comparison to observation techniques (Lofland, 1971).

The potential downside of interviews is that respondents will provide a 'socially desirable' response to please the interviewer or omit relevant information to hide something from the interviewer (Bradburn, 1983; Easterby-Smith, 1991). This can be the case when interviewing managers who want to project a good image of themselves and their organisation. If the researcher has the aim of establishing the most 'honest' account from a respondent and is relying on interviewing only, such 'impression management' could affect the validity of the interview and be a disadvantage (Easterby-Smith, 1991). This presents a problem in that without other data sources to provide a comparison, there is no way of knowing what are honest (i.e. not tried to actively deceive) 'facts' and what are calculated distortions (Becker and Geer, 1957). In this way, qualitative interviews are criticised for being weak on providing sufficient information to judge the trustworthiness (including reliability and validity) of accounts (Robson, 1995).

The flexibility of the semi-structured interview has been recognised as a potential methodological advantage, but it can also be a disadvantage for studies demanding reliability, generalisability or replicability. The lack of standardisation and structure means that there is little chance of another researcher replicating the interview (Bryman, 1989). With the interviewer determining the direction of conversation, there is the danger of 'interviewer bias' (Saunders et al., 2000). This is where the

interviewer influences the interviewee's response through loaded questions, non-verbal behaviour, or the way that responses are interpreted, imposing the interviewer's own belief and frames of reference.

The competency of the researcher is a major challenge in the qualitative interview. Altheide and Johnson (1987) suggest researchers must adopt a clear strategy to address 'trust and rapport...mistakes, misconceptions and surprises... and a way of fitting in' (p. 302). The interview can be an interesting psychological game where the interviewer is trying to guess what the interviewee is thinking as well as saying and adjust their questions accordingly (second order of mind). They may even try to guess what the interviewee is thinking about what they are thinking (third order of mind). However, gaining trust from respondents is a prerequisite for a successful interview (Seidman, 1991; Crapanzano, 1980). Interviewing can be exhausting for the researcher (Booth and Booth, 1994). Corbin and Morse (2003) describe how they can feel tired and exhausted from the strain of sharing the anguish of participants. In addition to interviewer skill, other physical aspects of the interviewer can determine success. For example, interviewer gender (Gluck and Patai, 1991), race (Stanfield, 1985) and how they present themselves (Becker, 1956; Spradley, 1979) can all greatly impact on the interviewee and influence the success (or failure) of the study. Cassell (2005) calls this 'identity work'.

### *Observations*

Morris (1973) offers a broad description of observation as 'the act of noting a phenomenon, often with instruments, and recording it for scientific or other purposes' (p. 906). As well as visual data gathering, all of the human senses are engaged in observation, including smell, hearing, touch and taste. Gold (1958) usefully classifies four different roles for the observer: complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant, and complete observer. The most popular form is to have some kind of involvement (usually observer as participant), where the researcher shares and contributes in the routine activities of the research context. This enables the researcher to share in the experiences of the subjects by not merely observing what is happening but also feeling it (Gill and Johnson, 1997). This can be carried out overtly or covertly, but due to ethical constraints ethnography of work is more often overt. A big issue here is whether the researcher is an 'insider' or 'outsider'. At one

level, this is whether people are familiar with the researcher or whether or they are a stranger. However, it is also about how the research participants treat the researcher socially. For example, whether they isolate or ignore them or whether they involve them and talk to them. Similar to interviewing, observation provides a richness of detail and an opportunity to discover important new issues that cannot be achieved through prior theorising (Friedman and McDaniel, 1998).

The most notable advantage of observation is the 'natural' context in which they operate. This means researchers are more evidently exposed to the local language and behaviours which different groups develop (Bryman, 2001). These are more difficult to gauge through surveys or interviews. For example, in a study of medical students Becker and Geer (1957) learned the term 'crock' which was applied to patients with psychosomatic complaints. Although the students denied that this was a derogatory term, repeated observations of their disgust soon made it unrealistic. This demonstrates a key advantage of the naturalistic observational context, in that hidden, deviant or forgotten activities can be discovered. Much of what we know about criminal subcultures is gleaned from participant observation (Bryman, 2001). For example, Ditton (1977) provides an incisive account on pilferage. Observation can also shed light on implicit activities which are taken for granted by group members (Yin, 1994). It has been argued that observations provide particularly high validity in comparison to other methods. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) argue that participant observation is high in internal validity because the immersion in social life allows the researcher to ensure a high level of congruence between concepts and observation. Gill and Johnson (1997) attach an ecological validity to observation because the natural setting reduces the possibility of contamination of the subject.

Like interviewing, observation techniques are labour intensive. In addition, they are very time consuming and can be slow in relevant data production. When the researcher chooses an overt method of conduct, there is a risk that events are staged for his/her presence (Bryman, 1989). Alternatively, employees may believe the researcher is a 'spy' acting as an instrument of management (Loftland, 1971). For this reason, acceptance and trust can be difficult to develop. The researcher must be reflexive and question: to what degree is the informant's statement the same as one s/he might give, either spontaneously, or in answer to a question, in the absence of a

researcher? (Burgess, 1984) This should increase the confidence of data validity. There is also danger of the researcher 'going native' (Bryman, 2001) which means they become enfolded into worldview of the people being studied which can bias and inhibit any goal of research objectivity. This is a particular danger when the researcher spends long periods of time in an organisation or research context.

In summary, ethnographic methods offer a useful approach to gain insights into social phenomena. They allow the researcher to gain responses to questions such as: what are people doing? How are they doing it? What do they understand by what they are doing? Are they likely to continue to do these things? I have taken the advice from various experienced researchers as discussed above and have attempted to use these points in my deployment of methods.

## **6.4 Research process**

The following section will review the process by which the theoretical insights were practically implemented through the fieldwork stage of data collection and data analysis.

### **6.4.1 Access, negotiation and ethics**

A single site was selected for the main fieldwork. The case had some interesting features which were especially relevant for the study. First, the organisation had undergone a recent change of leadership and strategic redirection. As suggested in the team literature, teamworking is often constitutive of work redesign and management change. Second, a 'team approach' was one of the most visible interventions resulting from the new strategy. Third, the organisation had introduced a series of organisational/HRM policies and practices that are often discussed as teamworking in the literature. This included an organisational restructure, participative management style, culture management, quality circles and team training.

Once a single site had been selected there was a period of negotiation with the main organisational decision makers, or 'gatekeepers'. Here, the Chief Executive of the council provided the initial go ahead for the fieldwork. It was agreed that a period of two to three months would be spent conducting research during the summer of 2006.

After this initial agreement, I met the council Chief Executive and head of HR to discuss the final arrangements. At this meeting we discussed the type of work I would be doing and settled on two service areas that I would spend equal times working within – about a month in each. It was mentioned that the research would need to be fairly flexible depending on the kind of work I was doing and it was agreed that any changes or further arrangement would be negotiated at a later time where appropriate.

The head of HR provided the initial recommendations for services to work within, based on earlier correspondence I had requested departments that were ‘actively engaging in teamworking’. The head of HR mentioned that the whole organisation had adopted a ‘new teamworking approach’ but it would be a good idea to work in departments that had different roles and ways of working to see how teamwork varied within this larger approach.

As an ethical consideration, it was agreed that I would inform all members of staff I met about the research being conducted at the council. I would then operate on an informed consent basis for interviews and meetings. The Chief Executive signed a consent form that stated he had agreed to the fieldwork and was fully aware of what I would be doing in the organisation. It was recognised that while I would be assigned certain projects and would work within the department as if a new member of staff, I would, in the words of the chief executive, ‘want to know what was going on’. This would allow me to ask questions and carryout interviews. In Walcott’s (1990) terms, my role could be described as either ‘Observer as Participant’ or ‘Participant as observer’.

#### **6.4.2 Conducting Fieldwork**

The fieldwork commenced on the first Monday in June 2006. I was introduced to the departmental staff by the service head (for the first department I was working in) and was then given a tour of the council buildings by the department team leader. Initial anxieties about fitting in and getting ‘good research data’ were to some extent allayed by the welcoming response from management and staff. In the office I was placed, the team leader presented me with a computer and desk that had been prepared for me along with a login code for the computer system and a comfortable swivel chair. All members of the team were happy to answer my initial queries to get me set up.

However, the first few days of unfamiliarity were consumed with the nagging feeling: 'Don't do a belly flop'. I felt it my clear responsibility to appear friendly and non-threatening. After all, I was a stranger from outside of the community who had come in to study what they were doing. This idea would be worrying for the most convivial host. Imagine the guest at a dinner party who declares at the table, 'I have come here to inspect your food and your home'. In practice, I made every effort to neutralise any negative connotations of being 'the researcher'. I informed people that I was keen to learn about local government and about the kind of work they were doing, rather than as some kind of expert who had come to judge whether they were doing things 'in the right way'. This was hard work at times when some people introduced me as 'the PhD student' and members of staff reacted with, 'Oh well you can tell us what we are doing wrong then!'

After the first few days of gaining familiarity with the office, the computer systems and the new group of staff, I managed to mould into the role of just another member of the staff. This meant that I had become a 'team member' - I had work to do and wasn't just there to observe activities but was also helping out. People gradually got used to me being there and started to have natural conversations in my presence - the 'best face' of new acquaintance gave way to the routine, the boredom, and petty politics of everyday work life. I managed to blend into the background so that people were happy to talk about most things, work and non-work, while I was around. I still had to ask plenty of questions, but this was because I was new, not because I was 'the researcher' or some external investigator.

I had spent the first few days becoming familiar with the setting and trying to blend into the background. However, as things settled down it was vital to build relationships with fellow team members and to become an active team player. This involved talking to members of staff about themselves, about myself, and about general things such as what they watched on TV the previous night, what they were doing at the weekend, where they were going on holiday. This would help develop trust, but also was essential to immerse myself into the new setting. Talking about life outside work and gossiping is all part of the natural routine of work and it was therefore a 'naturalistic' requirement for the research process (and for my sanity and survival).

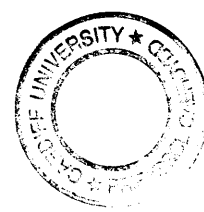
During the first few weeks of the fieldwork, I had wondered around the town at lunch with fellow team members; shown the best place to get chips; been to the pub and had a few pints at lunch, which, according to one team member, 'seems to make the afternoon go quicker'. I had attended a birthday lunch for someone in another department; I had been shown peoples holiday photos and children's school photos; and I had played my part in the routine office practical jokes, such as hiding the head of service's new tin of biscuits while leaving only one half-eaten morsel in the bottom of the box. This way of observing while participating was a difficult balancing act. I made every effort to take my lead from the regular team and office activities rather than interfere with the routines. I had to simultaneously hold the roles of insider and outsider. As Goffman (1959) suggests, 'management of the self' is central to the ethnographic process. I recall an incident about a month into the research when I overstepped the desired boundaries of 'self management'. A member of another department walked into the office, George, who was in his late twenties. I was introduced to him as usual and he remarked:

I thought I have seen you walking around the corridors. Didn't I see you in Tesco earlier?

I replied teasingly,

Yes I think so. Why were you buying all those melons? (He had not bought any melons of course)

To this, George got very embarrassed and walked out of the room a bit offended. It is times like this when you have to refocus your attempts to appear active (i.e. a participant) but at the same time neutral (i.e. not upset people, do anything too silly or anything that could affect the routines). There is also an ethical consideration here. There were other times of indiscretion. Towards the end of the research, I was blamed for some poor quality stationery that had been ordered after I had been given a project to look into the procurement of various materials. This led to a small argument between me and another member of staff. But fortunately these incidents were rare and I don't think any of them could be described as a 'belly flop'; unbalanced splashes into the pool maybe (each one being an interesting learning experience). Management of the self and a reflexive attitude towards my impact of the setting was an important but ultimately impossible challenge to perfect.



At the end of the first month of the fieldwork, my scheduled time was up for the first service area. I then had several meetings with the manager of the second department to discuss what I would be doing there. However, this manager was not as approachable as the managers I had worked with up to this point. This perception was backed up by various comments about the manager, such 'out of her depth' and 'dreadfully unorganised'. This new manager 'did not have any spare desks for me' within her department's offices and had not given much thought to the type of projects or work I could do in the following month. Thus, trying to make use of my fieldwork period most effectively and not pursuing this apparent dead end any further, I stayed in the first department for a further two weeks while I negotiated with the head of HR to find an alternative service to work for the second period. This was a surprisingly smooth process. The Head of HR contacted the head in a different directorate and within a few days I had an introductory meeting with him. Much to my relief, he was very welcoming and helpful. At short notice he managed to find me several projects to work on and offered to help organise interviews with a range of staff. I then moved to this new department and stayed there for one month. My last day of research in the second department was the Friday of the third week of August 2006. Both observations and interviews in the second department had been very useful and a considerable contrast to the environment of the first department. The second head of service offered me two further months paid work until the end of September 2007 but practical constraints (largely time) meant that I could not take him up on the offer. By the end of the fieldwork period I had worked at the council for ten working weeks – six weeks in one department and four weeks in the second.

#### **6.4.3 Data collection**

Like much of the research process, data collection was highly flexible and 'opportunistic'. Following methodological instruction, a 'systematic' field note diary was established. This took several forms, but was mainly A4, and occasionally A5, pads of lined paper. In line with Walcott (1990), I looked for 'nothing in particular' at first. I recorded everything and anything, whether it was people's names, office jargon, computer network folders, what people were talking about, the office furniture, meeting schedules, etc. (this could be labelled 'contextualism'). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest, data in itself is neither valid nor invalid –



it is the inferences made from data that are important. Spradley (1980) provides a list of categories that might be noted down at first: 1) space; 2) actors; 3) activity; 4) physical objects; 5) acts; 6) events; 7) time; 8) goals; 9) feelings. These all feature in my early notes. Wolfinger (2002) provides a discussion of different approaches to fieldnotes. He identifies two main strategies – ‘salience hierarchy’ (noting down what you think is important or deviant) or ‘comprehensive notes’ (noting as much as you can in a systematic manner). I started with a comprehensive strategy. Furthermore, I organised my notes temporally rather than thematically. I followed the natural sequences in the context, including start and finish times, meetings, lunch breaks, etc. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1982) note, many social situations offer their own unique timetables.

After familiarity had replaced strangeness, I started to be more selective with note taking (moving towards the ‘salience hierarchy’). There was no need to keep writing down how often people made the tea because this was pretty well documented. Instead I looked for patterns in the data. This might be patterns in what certain people said, how they acted, office or departmental routines, meetings, emails, etc. They were regularities that emerged from the unfamiliarity.

It could be contended that observer bias crept into my notes; that is, I was only writing what I happened to find interesting, persuasive, or important, rather than what was *actually happening*. Well at one level we can ask, what does ‘actually happening’ mean? If you looked at a photograph of a scene, it is straightforward to suggest that that scene actually happened (whether it was staged or not). But what you draw out of the scene as important or interesting depends on tacit knowledge and many observer-relative variables. Any depiction of the scene through mathematical or rhetorical logic can only reflect the reality of the scene in the same way as a map can reflect the contours of some land mass. So in this respect ‘actually happened’, or some similar claim, is a misleading objection that Chalmers (1999) would place into the category of ‘global anti-realism’.

Some authors worry about the researcher’s prior knowledge and experience as they enter a new research context. For example, grounded theorists would recommend a ‘blank slate’ when entering the field so as to let the data speak for itself. Any

justification or theoretical insight should then enter the investigation after the data has been collected so that observations do not merely reflect some preconceived ideas. However, this idea is naïve. As Siggelkow (2007) suggests, ‘an open mind is good; an empty mind is not.’ (p. 21). An empty mind can reflect a lack of knowledge which can hinder rather than help discovery. If you were looking through a microscope lens at a tissue sample for the first time, you would very likely see a group of blurry blobs and shapes rather than the intricate structure and function of cell organelles before you. Training, knowledge and expectations are needed to help interpret what you see through the microscope. Likewise, if you have no knowledge about the work situation it would be easy to become overwhelmed with all the activity and not know what to note down, or else leave the field with extremely mundane findings. Rather, the researcher must have an idea of what they are looking at for data collection to be productive. I do not follow the argument that if you think you know what you are looking for before entering the field, you will always find instances of it in any social situation which will bias your analyses.

It is a truism to state that I can present no evidence to confirm that my evidence reflects what actually happened. That is why we reject naïve empiricism. You might suggest that if I had recorded the whole fieldwork experience on video then we would have something more reliable to argue about. But eventually the data must be filtered into patterns and inferences anyway. In other words, bias is simply part of the essential research process of being *selective*<sup>9</sup>. It is clear from the data presented what the researcher has selected.

At another level, observer bias could be seen as a fundamental flaw in research apparatus. This could be likened to a faulty lens on a camera taking a photograph. If a resultant image is skewed, then any inferences made from it will be distorted. Analogously, if people’s words and behaviours were inaccurately recorded, this will lead to a distortion in findings. Ethnography certainly places a lot of responsibility

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<sup>9</sup> To provide an idea of the extent to which selection must take place during ethnography, consider the following approximation. In a normal office day of 8 working hours, workers may be talking for approximately 2 hours. An average conversational talking speed is 2.5 words per second. 2 hours multiplied by 2.5 words per second equals 18,000 words spoken by each worker per day. If we multiply this by a typical team size of 5 and then by 1 month of working days, we reach a total of 1,800,000 words spoken by a team of 5 in one month. That is the equivalent of 4,500 pages of this thesis text format. This is before we even consider noting down the behaviours of workers or any contextual data.

and discretion in the hands of the researcher. In an attempt to overcome this negative side of observer bias, I followed several measures suggested in the literature. First, I followed the 'golden rule' of recording observations and thoughts on the same day as the events occurred. Every evening after returning home from 'the field' I entered my notes into a word processor and added extra contextual thoughts and elaborations where necessary. The note taking process *in situ* was not problematic because in the office environment it is not unusual for people to walk around with notebooks and diaries. However, when in meetings or when in clear view of others, I was discrete about my notes. I also developed categories of notes, as recommended by Delbridge and Kirkpatrick (1994). These were: primary notes – direct observations of behaviours and words; secondary notes – observer reflections about the behaviours and words; and experiential notes – observer perceptions and feeling about what was going on.

In addition to opportunistic notes and observations, I conducted a series of interviews which were largely recorded using a Dictaphone. Observations provided a chance to record 'natural' worker interactions – managers talking to managers, managers towards subordinates, workers to workers, group activities, etc. Interviews, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to ask further questions, clarify my thoughts, and dig deeper into particular issues. During the research process I conducted thirty seven semi-structured interviews, each lasting between forty five minutes to one hour thirty minutes.

The combination of observations with interviews was a useful way to collect data. As noted in the literature, observations provided invaluable contextualisation; tacit understanding of language and behaviour; experience of the boring, mundane routine of work; experience of interactions among staff; an appreciation for the flow of time (essential to any routine). Observations gave me invaluable insights that could not have been collected through interviews alone. They also provided opportunistic meetings of people that I would not have come across otherwise. It is difficult for managers to control the research experience when you are left to wonder the corridors and sit in the background in offices. Interviews, on the other hand, provided a line of enquiry for events, activities and perceptions that couldn't be experienced first hand. They could be events that occurred in the past, things that I didn't have the

opportunity to experience or perceptions regarding the future. Interviews provided an excellent opportunity to deal with these issues. They provided a good comparison of data and a means to fill in the gaps. Observations made it possible for me to ask informed questions in interviews and this impacted on respondent's answers, knowing that I had observed what was going on. For example, interview respondents said things like, 'as you might have seen', 'as you probably know from being in the meetings', etc.

By the end of the research, I had filled eight notebooks with observations and notes. This, combined with interview transcripts, led to an 80,000 word document of field notes. I also collected a huge mass of secondary documents ranging from strategy/policy documents, minutes from meetings, organisational charts and pay scales, manager diaries, training course materials, performance appraisals, quality circle ideas, etc.

#### **6.4.4 Data analysis**

Qualitative data analysis is often seen as a problematic process because the range of data collected are voluminous, unstructured and unwieldy (Silverman, 1997; Bryman and Burgess, 1994). Burgess (1984) highlights that there are no rigid procedures prescribing how to record, code, index, analyse and report fieldwork, but what is important is that 'organisation, reflection, commitment, thought and flexibility are as essential to data analysis as they are to data collection.' (p. 183) Specific analytical approaches adopted by most scholars are unclear and inexplicit but many suggest that analysis is not something that should be relegated to the end of a project but is an integral part of the whole research process (Bouma and Atkinson, 1997).

Different perspectives of data analysis have been presented under names such as 'analytic induction' or 'grounded theory'. However, the methodological process need not change significantly between analytical strategies. Saunders et al (2003) note that a common feature in all strategies involves disaggregating the mass of qualitative data and arranging them into meaningful and related parts of categories. In other words, finding patterns of underlying tendencies and dispositions. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe the general analytical processes as: affixing codes to a set of field notes; noting reflections or other remarks in the margins; sorting and sifting through

these materials to identify similar phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, themes, and common sequences; and gradually elaborating a small set of generalisations that cover the consistencies discerned in the database. Most qualitative approaches are based on similar methodological principles to this. As Weller (1998) suggests, it is the process of conjoining groups of words that somehow 'belong together'.

Qualitative analytic processes all rest on the central mechanism of data coding. Atkinson (1990) describes this as a 'well-established style of work whereby the data are inspected for categories and instances. It is an approach that disaggregates the text into a series of fragments, which are then regrouped under a series of thematic headings' (p. 455). Codes may be of varying size. Loftland (1971) suggests a coding scheme from the microscopic to macroscopic including – acts, activities, meanings, participation, relationships, and settings. Codes may also be broken down into days, meetings, people, departments, roles, and groups/teams, etc. A consideration of scale is important as certain codes may be layered within other codes. For example, within a coded day there may be meetings, people, and events. The reduced codes are therefore related to each other by the larger code that they mutually belong.

### *Computer-aided analysis*

With the unrelenting diffusion of ICT and computer systems into every area of human endeavour, software packages have provided another option to help manage and analyse qualitative data. Fielding and Lee (1991) gave this kind of software the label 'computer assisted qualitative data analysis software' (CAQDAS). Emerging in 1980s, these have evolved into a wide composite of programs designed to carry out functions such as coding, searching, reporting, memoing, grouping codes and documents, and modelling (Barry, 1998). CAQDAS proprietary packages can be characterised into several types according to function: code-and-retrieve packages, theory-building software, audio and video analysis, and concept maps and diagrams. The predominant function is the 'code-and-retrieve' which is similar to the manual process of writing codes in the margin of written text. It is a way of linking groups of words together. The software is particularly efficient at searching for words or phrases and manipulating the text so that sections can be compared quickly and easily. The other main function, 'concept maps' or 'modelling', refers to the process of linking

codes together or developing concepts that can then be linked together with symbols, such as circles and arrows. The models may then reflect a theory regarding causal patterns, meaning/understanding contexts or historical/functional explanations. In recent years, a number of versatile packages have been developed to carry out most, or all, of the functions above, and have competed to become the standard platform among research communities (see Friese, 2004 for a recent review of six main packages). Among these, Nvivo (currently in version 7, 2006) has emerged as one of the most popular (for example, in CAQDAS training by ESRC research methods programmes).

To assess whether I could find CAQDAS useful for this project, I reviewed Nvivo 7 for its functionality. I played around with the platform using an example text file and used the software tutorials and advice from the 'University of Surrey CAQDAS Networking Project' (<http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/>) to become familiar with the interface. After considering the software functions and the aims for my study, I concluded that the software contained some useful functions but was not required for my project. First, it would take time to become fully familiar with the interface and once starting to use the software, it would monopolise the data analysis process so that everything had to become digital. I wanted to be able flexibly switch between coding and annotating data manually using an easy-to-read hard copy, as well as reading and altering the data electronically from the screen. Second, the main functions (code-and-retrieve and theory modelling) could be carried out easily with software I was already using. Searching, referencing and retrieving data could easily be carried out using functions within Microsoft Word and modelling could be carried out more flexibly with the freeware software Cmap tools (see <http://cmap.ihmc.us/>). These packages were not constrained by Nvivo file types that could not easily be converted. Third, Nvivo was an expensive proprietary package that I did not have access to on my private computer equipment, which provided a further practical constraint. In sum, while I am always keen to see how technology can make processes more efficient, CAQDAS did not seem to offer anything compelling that could not be done with other simpler, cheaper methods. The software offers nothing in the way of analysis but merely carries out efficient algorithmic searches based on search terms and displays codes or concepts.

### *Coding process*

The coding process started during data collection. When writing up the fieldnotes I added analytical thoughts about things that could be important, or areas needing further investigation. I also tried to link events together to build a picture of 'what was going on'. The process of writing up the diary notes onto the word processor each evening provided a useful (albeit tiring) opportunity to punctuate the raw data with coding ideas and early analyses. At the end of the research, the formal process of analysis began. As noted earlier, I had amassed around 80,000 words of fieldnotes and probably double this amount in secondary data (not including government/externally published reports). The data analysis process was thus going to be long and demanding (neat and efficient statistical analysis were beginning to look more attractive by the day). However, the anxiety of the required task had to be turned on its head. It was exciting to be looking at this new dataset and to discover new patterns in the world.

Following the methodological prescription in the literature, I first scanned through the notes and added analytical anchors, or codes, that summarised what each section was about. It might be the most salient aspect of the text, recurrent words/ideas or something which seemed interesting. I tried to keep these as brief as possible. After spending many hours reading and re-reading the notes, I had attached a code to the majority of the text. This process revealed 154 initial codes. These included things like 'team leader', 'office layout', 'friendships', 'deadlines', 'netball team', 'meetings', etc. Next I started to find similarities among the codes and link them together into larger themes. I used the mapping tool Cmaps (mentioned earlier) to organise my thoughts visually. I then put to one side the themes that did not have immediate relevance to the main research subject (i.e. teamworking). I did not discard these completely however, as I thought they may have use at a later stage. After several stages of consolidating and revising the themes, I arrived at four themes that would form the bulk of the research findings. These were: 1) Strategic transformation (new chief executive and management philosophy; 2) team management and meetings (control tactics, involvement and communication style); 3) HRM ('private sector practices' and teamwork as 'soft skill' through training); and 4) continuous improvement programme (quality circles as teamwork). These will form the main substance of the findings chapters.

## CHAPTER 7

# Research Setting

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter will set out contextual information about the general research setting and specific case study background. As mentioned in previous sections, social structures and routines often build on each other in an adaptive rather than revolutionary manner. It is therefore crucial to have an appreciation for the historical antecedents of a social setting before assessing its current form.

### 7.2 Local Government Context

There are 410 local government authorities in England and Wales, employing over two million people. These councils undertake an estimated 700 different functions across a number of service areas including: education, social services, environment services, planning and regulation, housing, and libraries and leisure (LGA, 2007). Local government expenditure is around twenty five per cent of all UK public expenditure and councils spend the largest proportion of this on education (41 per cent) and social services (19 per cent). Local government authorities in England and Wales are organised in two contrasting ways. In Wales, and some parts of England, a single tier 'all purpose council' is responsible for all local authority services and functions (e.g. Unitary, Metropolitan and London Borough). All other councils in England follow a two-tier system, in which responsibility for services are divided between district and county councils. Here, county councils manage the large service areas - such as education and social services; while the district councils manage areas such as local planning, housing and refuse collection. The unitary and county council levels are known as the 'top tier'.

Like much of the UK public sector, local government has undergone regular reorganisation over the last twenty five years. Perhaps the most significant change has occurred in the last ten years; a period witnessing an 'unprecedented attempt by UK central government to transform the politics and performance of English local government.' (Downe and Martin, 2006: 465) In 1996, local government in Wales



was reorganised from a two-tier system to a single tier of twenty two unitary councils. Old councils were merged together and had to work as single authorities. Further changes occurred in 1999 with the establishment of the devolved regional government in Wales – The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (legislated in Government of Wales Act 1998). While the assembly was granted limited executive powers, large parts of local government were devolved, included education, planning, social services and housing. The assembly sets the national priorities, strategic context and overall level of funding for services. Local government accounts for around half of WAG's budget. Devolution allowed Welsh local government to diverge from the rest of the UK in terms of how they managed local services and approach public performance improvement.

Traditionally, the management of UK public services has been characterised as paternalistic and bureaucratic (Gould-Williams, 2003). Farnham and Horton (1996: 85) suggest that 'whilst there was a concern for staff efficiency and the effective use of manpower, increasing attention [was] ... paid to the health, safety and welfare of staff.' Since the early 1980s, successive Conservative and New Labour governments have made sustained attempts to reform and modernise local services by making them more 'business-like' (Boyne et al., 1999). A common theme has been the promotion of increased competition, managerialism and performance measurement as a means of achieving service improvements (Pollitt and Bounkaert, 2000). This continued focus on reform, and the associated policies and regimes, has become known as the 'local government modernisation agenda' (LGMA). Since 1997, New Labour has introduced a plethora of policies, initiatives and advice to ensure that local authorities modernised and improve their performance. Stoker (2004: 78) calls this approach 'a deliberate strategy of letting a thousand flowers bloom' because they were not sure which policies would work most effectively. We will consider three periods that are of particular relevance for this study in the changes that they brought about.

The first period lasted roughly from 1997-2000. The 1998 White Paper set the ball rolling by promising a 'radical re-focusing of councils' traditional roles' setting a 'demanding agenda for change' that would replace the 'old culture of paternalism and inwardness' (DETR, 1998: 5). The showpiece of this period was the 'Best Value' regime (legislated in the local Government Act 1999), which according to Boyne

(1999) was the 'single most important reform of the management of local services since the introduction of CCT.' Best Value placed on all local authorities the duty to 'make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness' (DETR, 1999: 3.1). This required authorities to review all of their service areas over a five-year period in order to assess whether their existing methods of service delivery offered the best option available. Using the "Four C's" councils: *consulted* with stakeholder about service provision and performance; *compared* their current performance against other providers; *challenged* how and why a service was being provided; and *competed* with other providers to make sure they could deliver the best value for money. They published annual performance plans giving details of current performance assessment and setting out targets for improvement. Reviews and plans were then inspected by a newly established Best Value inspectorate based in the Audit Commission. External review and inspection has remained is a key feature of the LGMA as part of the so-called 'audit explosion' (Power, 1994; 1997).

The Best Value regime provided a strong impetus for local authorities to change their management systems and processes in order to become more effective. Such changes were likely to include 'private sector' performance management techniques and 'high involvement' HR practices (CIPD, 2002; Wilson, 2004). Indeed, Boyne et al. (2000) argue that Best Value was a public sector form of total quality management (TQM): 'It clearly conforms to the principles and practices of TQM. It gives most emphasis to the principle of continuous improvement, followed by customer focus and team-working.' (p. 15) Furthermore, Boyne et al. (2004) suggest that Best Value was intended to make a number of specific organisational changes in structure, culture, strategy process and strategy content. In terms of structure, the drive was for less bureaucracy by finding more flexible structures that facilitate responsiveness to a changing environment and integration by reinforcing a common purpose and less orientation around departmental 'silos'. While culturally, the aim was for 'nothing less than a radical refocusing on councils' traditional roles' (DETR, 1998: 5) by replacing 'traditional paternalism' with a 'performance culture' of innovation and entrepreneurialism.

The second period (2001-2004) saw a reconfiguring of the improvement agenda and a replacement of the Best Value regime, which, according to Downe and Martin (2006), was in a state of crisis. Problems arose because the Audit Commission underestimated the number of Best Value reviews that councils would undertake and they could not manage the vast number of inspections that were required. An Audit Commission report published in October 2001 proposed that rather than seeking to inspect individual services, its inspectors should focus on making judgements about each authority's overall performance and capacity to improve. The 2001 (English) local government White Paper stated that:

High quality council services rely on strong corporate governance from their political and administrative leaders. Where individual services fail the reason often lies in political or administrative shortcomings at the heart of the organisation. Service-based inspections and assessments do not in themselves provide sufficient means to address overall corporate performance. We will therefore introduce comprehensive performance assessments for all councils. (DTLR, 2001: clause 3.16)

There was, however, no let up in the 'drive' for improvement. Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) involved categorising all English councils on a five-point scale: 'excellent', 'good', 'fair', 'weak' or 'poor'. 'Excellent' authorities were promised less regulation and new 'flexibilities and freedoms', but the rest were subjected to even closer scrutiny. Councils in the bottom quartile of the Audit Commission's performance league table were publicly 'named and shamed' and forced to accept external intervention and 'recovery support' (Martin, 2002). Incumbent senior managers were eased out from these councils and interim teams were installed to oversee the formulation and implementation of improvement plans (Broadbent, 2003; Turner & Whiteman, 2005). This created uncertainty for authorities deemed to be performing poorly and provided further impetus for management to reform and modernise their organisational structures, systems and processes. Furthermore, league tables and the 'Beacon scheme' placed a spotlight on the management of better performing councils, giving those lower in the rankings a challenge to benchmark and learn from local government 'best practice'.

Policy makers in Wales turned their backs on the both Best Value and CPA. Shunning the principle of earned autonomy and the practice of publishing performance league tables underpinning policy in England, the Welsh opted instead for a regime that

emphasised the independent democratic mandate which local authorities had and relied heavily on processes of self-assessment and self-regulation. The Welsh Assembly introduced the 'Wales Programme for Improvement' (WPI) as a first sign of policy divergence between Wales and England in the wake of devolution. This was seen as a wider attempt by WAG to expand 'clear red water between Cardiff and London' by pursuing an increasingly distinctive approach to public service reform (Downe and Martin, 2006).

The WPI was introduced in Wales in 2002 as a new approach to stimulating and supporting improvement in the delivery of local services. The WPI process includes: annual performance assessment of all services to ensure that they meet the council's objectives; an annual joint risk assessment agreed between the council and its regulators; corporate and budget plans; and an annual improvement plan providing an overview of the council's performance and focusing on its priorities for improvement; annual regulatory plan (WAO, 2007). Rather than treating all services as the same, more fundamental reviews are conducted where the assessments and planning process identify continuing difficulties. Otherwise, authorities are apparently free to structure assessments as they see fit. A WPI report summarised, 'The essence... is of continuous action within each authority' (WPI Circular 28/2005: 10).

In 2004 WAG published a new vision for Welsh public services in *Making the Connections: Delivering Better Services in Wales*. As the title suggests, the main theme of the report was championing the collaboration and cooperation of the public sector rather than encouraging increased competition and public choice. Cooperation, it argued, would allow users and producers to be on the same side – referring at one point to the Welsh region as 'Team Wales' (p. 20). Contrary to English policy, the report argued that league tables 'do not support service improvement because they can make the turnaround of under-performers harder to achieve' (p. 17). However, 'Through collaboration, organisations can make best use of specialised resources, overcome problems arising from limited capacity and provide an integrated service that is focused on the citizen' (p. 19). WPI was also keen to stress a lower burden of regulation and inspection. Rather than policy makers demanding a specific form of modernisation, they wanted to allow councils the freedom to find our own way to

improve. This was seen as a responsibility of the whole organisation, not just senior management:

‘The co-operation and support of staff will be critical to delivering our vision. Staff need to feel part of these changes. ...For many staff, our proposals will generate new ways of working and more satisfying jobs. (p.33)

The following year, *Delivering the Connections* was published as 5-year action plan for achieving the vision of the previous report. The report was very similar in content to *Making the Connections*, apart from outlining their so-called ‘Top 10 commitment’ for action. These were: 1) survey; 2) standards; 3) participation; 4) local service delivery; 5) supporting the workforce; 6) better use of resources; 7) e-government; 8) Assembly Government Change Programme; 9) audit, regulation and inspection; and 10) Complaint and Redress. WPI was a core part of this programme.

The third period (2005-present) is marked by an increased focus on local authorities’ community leadership role in orchestrating local strategies to address ‘cross-cutting’ issues such as crime and disorder, regeneration, health and well-being (Darlow et al. 2007). Councils are exhorted to form Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), Local Public Service Agreements (LPSAs) and, in Wales, Policy Agreements, which bring together local public service providers including police, primary care trusts and representatives of business. The emphasis on partnerships, ‘cross-cutting’ and ‘joined-up’ working mean that various service areas must work closer together in order to develop plans and relationships with external agencies. This theme was echoed in the *Beyond Boundaries* Beecham review of Welsh local government (July 2006). In addition, a national programme for ‘e-government’ has advised authorities to make use of information technology in areas such as performance management, procurement and internal communications. Councils are now encouraged to innovate and adapt in all areas of their organisation to maintain priority on continuous improvement. These initiatives, combined with the CPA/WPI, have continued to keep local government management on its toes and hold modernisation at the forefront of local government activity.

In summary, for at least the last three decades, successive governments have made various, ever more explicit, attempts to reform and modernise the management of local government to sweep away traditional paternalism and bureaucracy. The general

vehicles of the LGMA have been increased inspection and external scrutiny; increased competition through target setting and league tables; and a managerialist focus on more 'business-like' management structures, systems and processes. These policies have created unprecedented pressure on corporate management to change their style and philosophy of management towards a more performance-driven 'private sector' approach. Some commentators argue that there is rhetorical power in the language of the LGMA which 'automatically defines those who take a different view as "old fashioned" - paternalist at best and merely self-interested at worst' (Cochrane, 2004: 485).

A Key part of modernisation is therefore likely to be more flexible organisational structures, 'innovative' or 'high involvement' HR practices and workforce development. Teamworking and HRM are likely to be high on the agenda in local government organisations. The pressure to change is likely to be evident across all council services and at different organisational levels.

## **7.3 Local Setting**

### **7.3.1 Dyffryn: the town and the people**

The aim of this section is to provide background information on the town and history of the case study to put the research process into an historical/institutional context.

Dyffryn CBC is a small unitary council in the south east valleys region of Wales. The borough has a population of fewer than 60,000. Around eighty per cent of the council employees live within the Dyffryn town or neighboring areas. The council is the largest employer in the area. Slater's Commercial Directory (1858-1859) described Dyffryn as 'a market town ... in the mist of bleak and barren hills'. The valleys communities are very close knit and a large proportion (approximately 92 per cent, ONS 2001) of the Dyffryn population have lived within the south Wales valleys all of their lives. The ethnic minority population is a tiny 1 per cent (ONS, 2001). In a 2006 tourist guide to the town, a so-called 'typical' twenty year old Dyffryn female resident is quoted as commenting:

For me [Dyffryn] is home because of the people, who are very community orientated. If you are in need in any way there are always people willing to help you. [...] If I had to describe [Dyffryn], I would say it's a place where

you get a good sense of community spirit, and where you'll feel instantly at home.

The south Wales valleys, and Dyffryn in particular, have suffered long-term deprivation and socio-economic problems largely attributed to the role they played in the British industrial revolution through the heavy industries of coalmining and iron production.

In the mid eighteenth century it was discovered that the area had a good supply of iron and coke, and this combined with the close proximity to Welsh ports, made the area highly attractive to the heavy industries. Between 1750s and 1800s, Britain was in almost continuous war. Canon balls were one of the main iron products of the time and so war was one of the main drivers of Dyffryn's prosperity (Tourist Guide, 2006). Through the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Dyffryn became an industrial centre for the UK and one of the largest towns in Wales: 'from an inconsiderate village, this place has risen to one of great commercial importance, owing to the prolific mines of ironstone and coal abounding in the neighborhood.' (Slater's Commercial Directory, 1858-1859) There was a great influx of workers from other parts of the UK and Ireland which resulted in the predominately Welsh language speaking area being replaced by the English vernacular. From 1801 to 1851 the local population increased by almost 600 per cent. This rapid growth led to overcrowding and, in turn, severe outbreaks of disease. Children as young as six could be found working long shifts underground and the area had the highest infant mortality rate in the UK. The Government gradually acknowledged the appalling conditions endured by the mineworkers and in 1842 the employment of women and young children in mines was banned (Williams, 1990).

During the early decades of the twentieth century a general decline in demand and unrest due to low wages in mining and iron working led to pit closures. The industries faced a structural crisis and a loss of market share due to cheaper competitors abroad. Almost half of the pits were closed during the 1930s and at this time over half of the Dyffryn population was unemployed. The years following World War II saw further decline and the widespread closure of the heavy industries led to further unemployment and deprivation in the valleys. Nationalism of the coal industry in

1948 brought much needed investment but this was not enough to arrest the long-term decline of coal.

The 1980s Thatcher Government forcefully favoured privatisation and 'individual freedom', as opposed to national control of industry and the eighties saw the closure of almost all of the remaining coalfields in Wales. Thatcher's policies of free market economics did not look favourably upon the loss-making, government-owned, National Coal Board. In 1984 and 1985, after the government announced plans to close many mines across the UK, mineworkers went on strike. The ultimate failure of this strike was the final blow for the UK's coal industry. Across the 1980s, employment in the coal industry was cut from 35,000 workers to fewer than 5,000; while 10,000 jobs were also lost in the iron and steel industries in south Wales.

In the 1990s, the Government attracted light industries to the region in an attempt to reduce the level of unemployment. Many of the settling companies were from the Asia (although these are now increasingly being replaced by European and American owned operations). Yet in spite of these initiatives, the Valleys region remains economically weak and a large part of the area is deprived to a level that qualifies for European Union Objective 1 funding.

The local community holds an apparently polarized perception of Dyffryn's history. Some see the industrial heritage as a terrible price that the area paid for industrial progress; whereas others regard the history as a golden age. A recent tourist information guide published by Dyffryn CBC in association with a local newspaper notes: 'one of the most significant towns in the industrial revolution [...] the area is proud of the many jewels in its historical crown.' In contrast, a Welsh regional television series in 2007, *The Valleys*, featured a local Dyffryn writer and journalist who spoke about the 'hidden awful history' of the industrial revolution. She suggested that the area was part of the creation of the modern world but is never mentioned in the history books because British historians rarely speak Welsh.

The people of Dyffryn are proud of the area as being at the cultural heart of Wales. The 2006 area guide has the strap line, '[Dyffryn...] capturing the mind, body and spirit of Wales.' However, a mixed message of the past persists throughout a publication intended to promote the current attractions of the town. The editorial



states that '[Dyffryn] people know they once had a place on the world stage and it is that self-belief that drives them.' But it goes on to identify the town as having a 'poor PR profile'. The cause, argues the editor, partly self-perception and low self-esteem - a so-called 'tough and proud of it' mentality. But as you would expect from tourist literature, the publication ends on an uplifting note: 'Now the town is experiencing a revival based of growing tourism, services and light industries. ... The town has risen and fallen and is confidently moving forward again.'

The 2001 census suggested that the county of Dyffryn has experienced some of the highest population loss in Wales during the 1990s, with a total decline of 7.5 per cent. This loss is largely due to out-migration and younger people moving to largely cities nearby. Current projections by the Office of National Statistics (2007) suggest that the population will continue to decline into the next decade. The region also has significantly above Wales average figures for poor health, long-term illness, low education, and teenage pregnancy. Unemployment is currently around 5.7 per cent. The area has high levels of deprivation with six wards identified in the 100 most deprived in Wales, with a further three sub-wards identified in the Communities First programme - the Welsh Assembly Government initiative targeting people living in the most disadvantaged parts of Wales.

This distinctive local setting is likely to have a strong impact on events within the case study organisation. Employees will be aware of the history of the town and the impact of socio-economic deprivation. However, it is not clear in which way this community background will impact the organisation. It could either lead to a culture of negativity and despondency at the size of the problem in the area; or alternatively, it could lead to a more hopeful and optimistic look to the future of the organisation and community.

### **7.3.2 Council background**

We will now consider the organisational background to the council and provide basic contextual details such as recent changes, council size, general performance data and workforce demographics.

Dyffryn is divided into eleven electoral wards returning thirty three councillors. In the 2004 local elections, the borough elected fifteen labour councillors, four Plaid

Cymru, thirteen Independent and one non-aligned. There is no party in overall control but the Council has a Labour leadership. The Council implemented a modernised democratic structure in May 2002 having decided on the ‘fourth option’ of a Board and streamlined committee structure following a public consultation exercise and referendum. The Council has a ten member Board, recently renamed as the Cabinet, with cross-party membership.

The council employs a workforce of around 3,300 people across all services. Like much of local Government, Dyffryn council has experienced considerable reorganisation over the past few decades. Before 1974, Dyffryn was a large County Borough Council (CBC) serving one of the largest areas in Wales. With the two-tier reform of the 1972 Local Government Act, the council was reorganised into a district council with considerably reduced service function. Then under the Local government (Wales) Act of 1994, the council was reinstated as a CBC under the unitary structure reorganisation of 1996. The council is currently one of the smallest of the twenty two unitary authorities.

### **7.3.3 Corporate Inspection 2003-04**

In January 2003, the Audit Commission in Wales (ACiW) published the first stage findings of a corporate inspection of the authority<sup>10</sup>. This report provided a damning assessment of the authority and concluded:

This interim report suggests that [Dyffryn] displays many of the characteristics of a failing Council and that there is a lack of strategic leadership at the most senior level. [...] If the Council cannot demonstrate its willingness and ability to take and implement the difficult decisions that are necessary, it will have to face the prospect of intensive regulation and the possibility of referral and intervention.

Among the many areas of concern were: no clear strategic aims and priorities at senior management level; lack of effective political and managerial leadership; lack of effective resource allocation; community plan and organisational internal/external communication treated as a ‘add-on’; little provision for training and development of

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<sup>10</sup> According to Audit Commission guidelines, corporate inspections seek to answer four fundamental questions, supported by a number of themes in each. The four questions are: 1) What is the council trying to achieve? 2) How has the Council set about delivering its priorities? 3) What has the Council achieved/not achieved to date? 4) In the light of what the Council has learnt to date, what does it plan to do next? Evidence is gathered under these themes and is used to inform an overall judgement on the Council’s capacity to improve. For more information see <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/>.

staff; serious deficiency in performance management and target setting; public perception of the Council is very poor; little effort to learn from good practice elsewhere and a feeling that the Dyffryn community is 'unique' in need; and no effective corporate improvement plan and strategic direction for improvement.

As a result of this report and regulatory pressure, the incumbent chief executive effectively resigned by taking holiday leave and then retirement. An interim chief executive was appointed in February 2003 for a period of six months to develop a change programme for turnaround and to provide time to recruit a new permanent chief executive. The second stage of the corporate inspection was reported in July 2003 which discussed the changes since the first stage in the form of a 'health check'. The short report concluded, 'Overall, the inspectors found evidence of forward movements and that the change process so far had been a positive experience for the authority.' Positive findings included evidence of: clear leadership, politically and managerially; new Council vision; well-crafted improvement plan; improvement in external communication; improved morale, optimism, and enthusiasm for change. However, problems remained such as: evidence of a blame culture; frontline members feeling constrained in the way they can operate and contribute to their service; gulf between the old Borough and County organisation with staff behaving 'as if the two cultures never actually merged in a new authority'; internal communications need special attention. Shortly after this report, a permanent Chief Executive was appointed who took up the post in September 2003.

#### **7.3.4 A New Era**

The third and final stage of the inspection report was published in April 2004. This report was considerably more positive in tone than the previous two stages. It concluded,

It is our final judgement that the Council is developing a capacity to improve. Since our first inspection it has made significant progress in putting in place key building blocks and achieving improvements in a number of services. It must now prove that it can continue to build that capacity and convert it into improvements and positive outcomes for its customers and the community across all services. [...] Our interim report stated that if the Council could not demonstrate its willingness and ability to take and implement the difficult decisions that were necessary, it would face the prospect of intensive regulation and the possibility of referral and intervention. The Council has demonstrated that willingness and has taken many difficult decisions. Based

on the progress it has made and its prospects for continued improvement, we do not believe the Council is now a candidate for referral or intervention on corporate grounds.

The report still suggested there were still major challenges in implementing and delivering the proposed improvements. While the new leadership was recognised as providing much needed impetus and direction for change, buy-in to change by councillors and middle management was still crucial. The long process of change had only just begun.

### **7.3.5 Seeds of change: the organisational restructure**

Much of the final inspection report had commented on the proposals of a strategic document, the 'Transformational Strategic Plan', devised by the new chief executive several weeks after his arrival. This thirty page document set out a new management philosophy, organisational restructure and a change agenda to respond to each of the audit commission's inspection recommendations. The executive summary described the report as 'a radical plan for the radical transformation of the way that [Dyffryn] delivers services to its customers.' The details of this report and how this fit into the new leadership philosophy will be considered shortly.

The organisational restructure was part of the prehistory of evidence before the research programme began. This period was clearly central to the change process as departments were redesigned and new roles were created. The old structure consisted of seven functional directorates: 'Education'; 'Human Resources, organisational improvement and business services'; 'Finance and IT'; 'Social services'; 'Housing and technical services'; 'Legal and regulatory'; and 'Leisure and community regeneration'. Each directorate was headed by a Corporate Chief Officer (CCO) and was broken down into further service areas with managers. There was another department lying outside the other directorates called 'Economic Development and European Affairs'. This area managed aspects of regeneration that used external grants and funding such as Objective 1 European funding.

The Chief Executive's new structure is based around four 'customer facing' frontline services which were renamed: 'Integrated adult services' (IAS); 'Adults, Families and Life-long learning' (AFL); 'Customer Community Services'; and 'Customer

Corporate Services'. This notably involved splitting the old Social Services directorate into two separate departments - one focussing on children and the other on adults (16 years plus). In addition to the four frontline services, there are two reconfigured 'corporate support services' which were named 'Corporate centre' and 'Financial and risk management (FARM)'. Each directorate is now headed by a 'corporate director' who serves on an 'executive board'.

#### **7.4 Strategic change and the birth of 'Team Dyffryn'**

The new chief executive, who we will call here John, arrived at Dyffryn CBC in September 2003. With commencement of the fieldwork (June 06), John had therefore been in office three months short of three years. By this time, most of the transformational strategy had been implemented in some way. While it may have been desirable to conduct fieldwork during the first few years of rapid change to track progress, this was not possible given that the project began towards the end of 2004. However, several commentators have suggested that studies into organisational change and teamworking are often weakened by empirically tracking the initial process of change and then leaving the field before new processes are fully embedded (Buchanan, 2000). It is maintaining momentum beyond the initial uncertainty, confusion or excitement of change that can often be the biggest challenge for new management programmes. I was interested more in the implemented policies and practices, and how they were working, than the processes of interpretation, resistance, negotiation and adjustment that necessarily imbue early stages of change programmes. Nevertheless, key steps in the change process were clearly important to provide historical context. Before we consider some of the more specific findings of the study, it is crucial to appreciate the background developments. As mentioned earlier, much of the new approach was described within a document called the *Transformational strategic plan*. We will therefore start with this document.

##### **7.4.1 The Transformational plan**

The plan was John's first opportunity to communicate his managerial intentions to the council's stakeholders. It was crucial for John that it carried impact. The introduction opened with a dramatic dilemma that was intended to make every employee and councillor sit up and take notice:

In many ways we are at cross-roads – not just of performance, but for the whole county borough: probably the *last chance* to transform Dyffryn into a region with a strong future economic role in SE Wales. ...With this last chance to succeed we need to work together as one organisation and with our customers as one team – *Team [Dyffryn]*. We win and transform as a team, or we lose and observe continued decline operating as fragmented groups. It is a *stark choice* for every employee, every councillor, every customer and every stakeholder. *We have not functioned as a Team. Let us now change that, for good* [Emphases added].

To grasp the ‘last chance’ to transform the council and operate as a team, the report then gave some hints about what was required. It emphasised the negative findings of the inspection report, such as the ‘blame culture’, ‘unclear roles’ and a ‘divide’ between the old county and local borough personnel/services. It then outlined a solution to these problems. First, it meant ‘putting aside attitudes and opinions which individuals may have debated over’. Instead, it was argued that the ‘Bigger Picture’ of public need was more important than individual interests. Second, to become a ‘world-class’ organisation a team approach was critical. Within the first four pages of the report, the word ‘TEAM’ (in capitals) was used on more than ten different occasions. Acting as a team would lead to a ‘virtuous upward circle’. Third, every member of staff must commit to ‘*playing their part* in TEAM [DYFFRYN]’. This involved becoming professional and responsible employees. Fourth, building a new business-like reputation for the council and better public image for the town was essential because ‘everyone wants to associate with a successful organisation, but to disassociate with a derided one.’ Once a good reputation was built, everyone would be proud to work for the organisation and things would improve from there.

These points were summarised into aspects of ‘real change’ through four organisational concepts or aims: a) *customer led*, not member- or management-led; b) working as a *coordinated organisation*; c) developing the *contribution of every employee*; and d) *actions, results and outcomes* - not processes, reports and meetings. The section concluded with exhortations that ‘the need for transformational change could not be more clear. It is time to put the transformational strategic plan into action.’ The plan was set out as a three year strategy. Thus, the fieldwork commenced towards the end of the ‘transformational’ period. The proposed changes provided the mission of becoming ‘excellent’ within three years. This was defined as the upper quartile of performance indicators for authorities in Wales. To help illustrate the

contrast with what had come before, the report then presented a table contrasting John's perspective of 'traditional' local authority with his visions of 'new' local authority. This has been condensed below:

**Table 2 Contrast between old and new council philosophy**

	<b>Traditional Local Authority</b>	<b>New Local Authority</b>
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No competition, no leagues</li> <li>• Stable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Continuously changing</li> </ul>
User	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General public</li> <li>• Respectful of Local Authority</li> <li>• Informed by Local Authority</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer</li> <li>• Critical, distrustful of LA</li> <li>• Informed by media, Agencies</li> </ul>
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central Government</li> <li>• Local residents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional and central Government</li> <li>• Local customers</li> <li>• Key stakeholder groups</li> <li>• Media</li> </ul>
Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public good and services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer choice</li> <li>• Public value</li> <li>• Public accountability</li> </ul>
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State centred</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market and customer-centred</li> <li>• Shaped by key stake-holders</li> <li>• Engages with key partnerships</li> </ul>
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management through hierarchies</li> <li>• Individual service areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational empowerment</li> <li>• Networking</li> <li>• Partnerships</li> <li>• 2-way interactive with customers and key stake-holder groups</li> </ul>
Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State provider</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer services</li> <li>• Local carer, supporter, provider</li> <li>• Integrated, connected services</li> </ul>
Appropriate Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Command structure</li> <li>• Established hierarchies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devolved</li> <li>• Delegated</li> <li>• Decentralised</li> </ul>
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bureaucratic</li> <li>• Passive</li> <li>• Central Government driven</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomous goal setting</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Pro-active</li> <li>• Local Continuous Improvement</li> </ul>
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens</li> <li>• Officers</li> <li>• Members</li> <li>• Staff</li> <li>• Leave</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customers</li> <li>• Managers, Directors</li> <li>• Councillors</li> <li>• Co-workers, team members</li> <li>• Holiday</li> </ul>

The main theme was signalling a movement away from the stereotypical top-heavy, bureaucratic, member-led local authority towards a more competitive, business-like and management-led organisation. We will now consider the role and influence of John more closely.

### 7.4.2 New Leadership

It is safe to say that John caused quite a stir when he arrived in Dyffryn. Within a short period of arriving he had received media attention in the local and regional press and on regional television news. One newspaper labelled him a 'controversial figure' because he had negotiated one of the largest public sector salaries in Wales for managing one of the smallest council authorities. Meanwhile, council staff seemed to be what could be described as overawed by his new presence. During the fieldwork one administrative member of staff said, 'he scares the life out of me', while a team leader reflected: 'When he arrived I thought to myself, I've never met a person like this before!'

Biographical information revealed that John had built an extensive career in the private sector before he moved to the public sector and Dyffryn CBC. He had worked for several major multinationals, working as an expatriate for some time in Asia and Africa. He had become a marketing director by his early 30s and a regional managing director shortly later. He had then directed his management acumen towards turning around failing private companies, starting with an American multinational manufacturer. After marrying and having children he settled back in the UK. He worked as a chief operating officer in an English CBC before taking the new role as chief executive at Dyffryn. One media article summarised his biography as 'an international business man ... he's worked in 28 countries, turned around multimillion pound businesses and recovered from malaria, but taking on the role of chief executive at Dyffryn was his greatest challenge'.

After the initial stir, he caused further ripples when he was selected for a Welsh leadership award two years into becoming chief executive for 'turning around the performance of the council'. This led to a series of media eulogies for John's management philosophy and style. One article wrote: 'the council has undergone dramatic turnaround in performance and much progress has been credited to [John's] dynamic personal leadership and innovative business practices he had brought'. Another applauded, "'Team Dyffryn" transformed Dyffryn CBC by applying management and leadership approaches developed in the private sector and, as a result, lasting radical and positive change is being achieved.' On John personally, one sponsor for the leadership award observed, 'John's enthusiasm for his role is



contagious and his standards and leadership style has definitely helped to change the climate and values of the council', while a published quote from a previous HR manager in the council declared, 'he inspires everyone to raise their game.' Finally, one news report summarised: 'he wanted to see if the skills he had developed in private industry would work in the public sector. They do.'

Secondary source quotes of John mainly highlighted how he came to Dyffryn for a 'new challenge' in the public sector and how bringing up a family had focused his attention onto public service issues such as education and public safety. Regarding the award, John was pleased to receive recognition that 'we have come a long way in a short time.'

During the fieldwork I had several opportunities to gauge the leadership style of John firsthand. First, I met him for an hour meeting before the fieldwork period to negotiate the research process; during the fieldwork I was able observe him chairing several meetings and events; then towards the end of the fieldwork, I held a 1 ½ hour face-to-face interview to develop his thoughts in more depth. The discussion above has indicated the apparent centrality of John to the Dyffryn case. Therefore, it is important that I try to convey John's style as fully and lucidly as possible. To do this, I have decided to use extensive verbatim quotes from observations and interviews to serve as the main narrative. It is hoped that this will be more instructive for the reader at this stage than simply summarising my personal impressions of his management style.

### *New philosophy and style*

In my first meeting with John, his expressions could be described as warm and welcoming. He behaved in a gregarious and socially fluent manner. From previous experience of meeting or hearing senior business executives, he perhaps displayed the typical 'charismatic' personality traits. These included an imposing yet relaxed posture, ease of expression, use of inoffensive and/or self deprecating humour and a desire/expectation to control the pace and direction of a conversation. Initially he was keen to hear what my prior knowledge and views of Dyffryn were. I said I had little prior knowledge, other than the town being characterised as close-knit or having the typical 'valleys town' image. He replied, "It is just that", an archetypal "valleys town... very valleys". He went on to recount his understanding of the history and

culture of the town. He mentioned the central role of Dyffryn in the industrial revolution and how it used to be one of the big industrial centres of Europe. He described the essential Dyffryn mentality of this time as hard working “men of toil”. He described the rapid decline of the town’s prosperity due to poor health and living conditions and the rise of unemployment as the heavy industries declined. This period of rapid growth and then decline was followed by a long period “in the dark ages”. John remarked,

Today it is still trying to get out of this situation. The town has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, poor education, low job prospects, no family unit. It has been the lowest of the low. This is the situation the council is now trying to turn around.

We then discussed teamworking and he was curious to know what ‘post-bureaucratic’ organisation was and where the idea came from (a term I had used in previous correspondence, probably foolishly). I emphasised the scholarly attention towards unobtrusive forms of management such as culture management and teamworking. It was clear from his comments that he assumed I thought teams were a good thing for organisations. He said, they “have done a lot of team culture change but maybe not enough...” and he is always looking to “improve the team ethic”. He suggested that a team approach was one of the most lacking aspects when he arrived at the organisation and that is why he put so much emphasis on this. At a later meeting, he reflected on the size of the challenge at the council:

When I came here, Dyffryn was in the doldrums - as a council, but more importantly, as a place - and it had been in the doldrums for decades. ...there were lorry loads of misery and impact on family life over the decades. ...[I]t had this past that everyone had in their minds was glorious. From what I have read of it, it didn’t seem to me to be a glorious past. I think it was a very unpleasant place to work 180 years ago. ...So people in Dyffryn have been allowed to think that the town occupied this wonderful place and they are now very bitter about their situation.

...People were delivered into unemployment and the big bad people that led them into this were the Government. The public sector and local Government did, as far as those people are concerned out there, nothing to change that. You know the rhetoric: “sorry to hear you have lost your job”, “sorry to hear the coal mine has closed” or “the factory has closed”. Rhetoric does not put food on the table. So that has led people in this area, and the valleys as a whole, pretty cynical to the public sector and about Government. Three years ago you had all that, you had it in spades. So the council had received from the Welsh Audit Commission [an inspection evaluation] that we were failing our customers and there were only two other councils in the whole of the UK in that category, so we were in the worst few in the whole of the UK. Councillors were being pilloried by the local press, they had a very poor relationship with

the public out there and they had nothing [good] to say about the council so when the audit report went out there it just confirmed all those views.

So from John's point of view, the problems were longstanding and deeply entrenched. He then turned his reflections towards the state of the organisation and the main organisational problems he identified:

This council employs three thousand staff so it was a huge number of people being affected by this. They were told you are crap and a lot of them were saying, "Well no I'm not, I'm working hard and I'm doing some good stuff." Ok then, rationalise that, your organisation is crap. That allows them to get on and be good at what you [sic] are doing working for an organisation that you don't like. And you had quite a few of those camps. Obviously most people like to think they are good at what they do, so they thought the small department they worked in was good, but the whole organisation they felt was no good. But if the whole does some how not connect to make a real impact on the people out there, the opportunity is being lost.

... One of the most important things in those first days was to stop the battles that were going on between councillors and staff. Councillors used to march into peoples offices and say we need this to be done or that to be done. And if you've never spent anytime running anything, you know, you don't need a GCSE to be a councillor, how to you suddenly get this wisdom to tell people what to do? Where do you get the experience to say what are they doing now to say don't do that, do something else. Employees needed to be brought together to believe this can be a really excellent organisation if we work at it and get through barriers about credibility, the people saying "Are you serious? This is Dyffryn."

The problems seemed to be put down to poor leadership from both management and councillors. So what did he do to start turning things around? What specific management approach did he think was most lacking and how could it be improved?

When I looked at the place, there was no performance management system or organisational communication. No structured approach to connect people to the organisation and we were not making the connections with the outside world, Welsh Assembly Government, or our customers. So I sat down with every councillor in small groups and basically read out a few home truths and told them how I thought the council needed to go forward and asked them to support it. I said, "You can go on as you have for years but what I am asking you to do is recognise that that hasn't worked and if you buy into this new way of working you can see it can work".

... It was broadly the same message for employees in many many meetings trying to meet with more than 1000 employees, I talked to them directly - you have to get out there. I actually walked around into every single office to try to meet with every single person and shake them by the hand and try to connect with them.

The main thing was to say to them they are important and I am not more important than you are, we have different jobs to do, but we are all in it together. So we created the idea of "Team Dyffryn" to create the team ethos to

bring the organisation as one. In an organisation of three thousand, you are always going to get the cynics, you know the people who are in it for life - public sector lifers. In an area like Dyffryn there are a high percentage of those people: who work but don't necessarily like it. So there is a contract in their minds which says, "Just about I accept this job", but there won't be any major positives or enthusiasm.

...before it was a very very dormant culture, you know, and we passionately believe that people have been coming in over the years and switching off from being a vibrant person that they may be at home and going in to work for the council with protocols, and regulations and policies. So trying to free them of some of that and bring the superman out in them a bit and say you can be that person that you are.

...So basically it was to say we need a team spirit to inject into the council. It was to say, "you start in the team, whether you are a councillor or an employee, you start in the team. You can opt out, if you choose. You can't opt in, because you are already in it. But let it be known if you are one of the people standing on the side lines criticising it. Or are you going to be on the field of play? By all means be critical constructively. If you are on the field of play, you can shout at the person, you know, saying for crying out loud get your act together because we are gonna drop a ball and we are going to have a problem if you don't do something. You can still do that, but you are doing so as a player, not a spectator." [T]here is a substantial amount of recognition that "Team Dyffryn" is an ethos that helped and it will continue to help. We have developed a new corporate induction programme so that new staff understand this from day one.

### **7.4.3 New way of working**

So the team ethos was a central focus from the start. The 'Team Dyffryn' approach was the main strategy to overcome the embedded blame culture. Key components of this approach were increases in responsibility and motivation of employees. But what changes would this approach require in relation to organisational structure? John continued:

One of the other things we did was to get organised. People call a council like this an "organisation". But you don't arrive at the term by just being there at the same time and the same place. I thought frankly when I arrived, and I told people this, that we had a "disorganisation". So getting organised became important. What we had were seven directorates, all expressed in flat terms. If you ask people to draw their organisation, you know, "what does it look like?" people imagine what it looks like visually. They have an idea about where they are and where others are in the organisation like layers. There is an idea out there that you have to be hierarchical: well no! There is also an idea that you need a command structure: Nope! You can be hierarchical without a command structure, you can be hierarchical with a command structure - there are a range of options. But local government when I came had brought in the idea that you needed to be a hierarchy but also have a command structure. It didn't need either. But the idea that the way things needed to be done were from above. So people looked up and waited to be told what to do but did

nothing until they were told to and then kept on doing what they had done for years. An extraordinary culture! One-way flow and its reinforced by the language of local government which is cascading things down, drip feeding things - weird stuff! And they don't add value to the kind of organisation they need to become. So we had lots of conversations with people to say lets not be a command structure or a hierarchy, lets aim, instead of having a vertical structure, let be a horizontal structure. I called it the Star Ship enterprise! Which got a few laughs but I wanted to make it something people could understand. On the Star Ship Enterprise you've got a guy in the middle, Captain Kirk, who might be a business unit head, or maybe a director, or maybe a team leader. In the original series of Star Trek there were a team of lieutenants and each had a critical role to play. So the fact that Kirk had more authority was not the issue, they worked as a team and each one had a key role to play in the team. And it was a horizontal flat structure. So try to express to people the image that it is a flat structure.

...So we have tried to put this into place by changing this hierarchical structure of seven directorates and creating SMBs [service management boards]. And let's simplify the organisation, so we have four front line customer facing directorates and create for each one of them an SMB and pool the talent of people that are there. Rather than having a director, just one person there at the top, having a pool of seven to eight people there so there is a broad range of expertise, where they are all on a level playing field and they can challenge each other and contribute. So we have that structure now and all that is new.

The discussion here about 'hierarchy', 'command structure', 'authority' and 'Star Ship Enterprise' might be confusing for the reader. Rather than technical terms, it appeared that John used the notions of 'hierarchy' and 'command structure' to denote a general picture of top-down highly centralised system of organisation where decisions are made by a small group of autocratic managers who make commands from above. In particular, 'command structure' seemed to be used with the Tayloristic (1911) notion of strict separation between conception and execution of work tasks – the former being the realm for management, the latter for workers. John's distinction between 'hierarchy' and 'authority' seemed a little obscure since his new structure retained several management layers.

In most parts of the organisation the new structure provides four layers of management between the top and the frontline: the chief executive, directors, heads of service and team leaders. The span of authority for middle and senior management is fairly wide. All departments, which vary in size from eight to fifty employees, are headed by a single manager and related departments are grouped together into directorates headed by a director. Within departments, team are broken down

functionally into groups of five to ten employees and are supervised by a team leader. The number of team leaders within each service therefore varies according to the respective size of the department.

The emphasis with John's various notions of power, and the idea of a 'horizontal' organisation or 'Star Ship Enterprise', seemed to be about decision making and to promote worker involvement in all organisational activities, including managerial decisions. It was to signal that although the role of management is to make various kinds of decisions and control activities, this does not preclude workers from making suggestions and impacting on decision making. The introduction of service management boards, where lower-level team members were allowed to attend if they felt they could contribute, reinforced this more participative approach. The introduction of something called Continuous Improvement Programme (CIP) also contributed to this (and will be discussed shortly). It was an ethos that was intended to rub off onto all managers in the organisation and impact the way they controlled and managed their teams. This was also applied to the councillors and senior management:

Another thing we did was to create an executive board. There were no *directors* before. We also placed on the board councillors as *non-executives* so they were connected to the senior management of the organisation. Previously they were sitting outside it and were able to criticise it but if you bring them in, and get them being a part of it, it's a lot harder to criticise something you are involved in yourself. And the same for service management boards, the councillors, the cabinet holders, they sit on the boards so they have direct contact with management and that's a very important change and it's allowed the managers and councillors to work much more as a team together. ...Before that instead of directors they had what they called 'Corporate Chief Officers' and I wouldn't know what they did if they bit me in the leg! With job titles, if you pick a descriptor which is meaningless you are at the most extreme end of wrong job titles: corporate chief officer... what the heck? You know! It just sounds kind of grand! What does it mean? If the title you've got at the top of the organisation is fuzzy or unclear, everyone else in the organisation - what do they make of it? They might think, oh they are one of those people who are important in the organisation. NO! That doesn't work. If the title is a non-transitive, an officer - you can't office anything. If you are a director, you can direct things, if you are a manager, you can manage things, but local Government loads itself up with these terms; officer, which actually has an implication that they are not management. And the implication is we process things, we don't manage things. So we changed that.

I asked John whether this change in structure and ethos required a change of management personnel:

Do you mean did I get shot of the lot of them? ...I have done that in the past ... but in the public sector I have taken more of a lenient line. ...I managed to get one person who was a Chief Officer out of the organisation and retain the others to appoint five as directors and one as a level just below that. At the next level down one or two people left because they knew they were going to be found out. But most of the workforce is the same and for a lot of them their approach has changed a lot. It was the old culture that was holding them back.

To help establish the new management style and develop those with less experience, a leadership group and training programme were also devised:

We developed a group of managers into something we call DLG [Dyffryn Leadership Group] to say, "You're all leaders, not just the chief executive, not the political leader of the council, you are all leaders and we are going to develop your leadership skills." So we developed some of these skills over the last two years through various events and a training programme, which we were just handing out some certificates for last Thursday actually and they are accredited skills.

The idea of a flat organisational structure, of leadership and responsibility were further elaborated in another initiative abbreviated as CIP. John went on:

One of the mechanisms to try to connect with people was the continuous improvement programme [CIP]. This was to say management in this hierarchy is not a reflection of knowledge and wisdom and let alone a reflection of good ideas. A channel of good ideas doesn't come from hierarchies. You might have the best ideas coming from someone on reception that sees customers coming in all day and they can point out the blinding obvious. If you haven't got a mechanism to allow that person to feed into the management we may be starved of very important ideas. So we set about introducing CIP teams to come up with ideas and then present them to SMB meetings. ... I was doing this in other organisations for about ten to fifteen years and I went through a fair amount of development of it in those organisations but trying to take out from that experience some of the core material that would be useful for this organisation. ... We have around eighty teams coming up with ideas.

John also put a lot of emphasis on performance management. He described the new approach:

...the performance management framework was a priority in the first few months here. ... [O]ne key aspect of that is QBRs [quarterly business reviews] ...The idea is that two days every quarter all staff can come and talk to the executive board and senior councillors and we will have some constructive dialogue to try and focus on how it's going - the warts and all stuff - but actually focus on our performance. If you had seen it over time you would see the QBRs becoming more embedded into the organisation. At the start they were a bit worried that they were being judged.

QBRs were a conference format where most managers, and any other staff who wanted to attend, met in the council chamber. There were a series of presentations by

every service head and director across all directorates reviewing the performance of their respective department, followed by an open discussion. While this was a review process and a chance for staff from different departments to meet and discuss important issues, the type of performance measures discussed were informed by another aspect of the new performance management system:

We put together a software package we called the IAPT [Improvement action planning toolkit] and business planning toolkit. We call it a toolkit because it is just that, it's not just a review that you write once a year and stick it on the shelf which is the local government thing, completely barmy, its barking; How long does it take to write the plan? Oh you wouldn't believe the hours, the days, and the weeks. And what do you do after that? Stick it on the shelf and never look at it. It's over there in the pile. And plan after plan after plan with no connection between the plans. So rather than writing it once a year, lets break it down across the year. This was shocking for people, but instead of yearly, let's have a daily plan, a plan that can be established once a year but updated and looked at every day. So the toolkits look at what are the priorities, what are the actions that need to be done and who is going to do it [sic], when is it going to be done? The when is achieved using a Gantt chart, a calendar for when things are going to be done on a timeline.

...It was best to start with the basics and that's what this software does. In the past I have seen consultants come in and train you in a new project management approach and it feels like its them doing it for you and then it drops back after they have gone. For the most part this is developing in the culture very well.

The new performance management framework was the practical side of the new approach. It provided direction and coordination for daily work tasks and was intended to provide a consistent method that teams could use to organise and monitor projects. In principle, the software package also contributed to the Star Ship Enterprise horizontal approach in the sense that workers could manage their priorities according to the data inputted into the IAPT computer file than according to the commands of management. John summarised the transformational management philosophy:

Overall we have tried to introduce a culture that we can build on: the team, CIP, training, performance management programme. I think over the last few years people have seen a real difference in the service we are providing. We have a lot more credibility and confidence as a result.

The preceding presentation of John's views provides a good introduction to the changes that were introduced in Dyffryn between late 2003 and 2006. While John devised the initial strategy after consulting the audit commission's evaluation and the views of various stakeholders, the development and implementation of the strategy



was overseen by the 'Improvement Steering Group' which included John, a number of senior management and councillors. The first major change was the restructuring which occurred within two months of John's arrival. The other interventions were gradually introduced as long term projects, each one having a plan of implementation spanning the following few years. It is clear that John saw the challenge of turning around the council in terms of a cultural imperative as much as a technical one. In other words, a focus on the routinised worker attitudes and ideas was required, as much as the routinisation of work tasks and behaviours. This was demonstrated through the repeated reference to 'TEAM DYFFRYN' and the related ideas about removing the blame culture, increasing motivation and responsibility, and increasing confidence in the credibility and reputation of the organisation. Furthermore, the weight given to the change in language such as 'customers', 'directors', and 'hierarchy' further elaborated the symbolic intent of the new approach. The organisation was re-branded 'TEAM DYFFRYN' on all council reports and materials. The six main directorates and many smaller departments were renamed and every member of staff had a new title – whether it was 'team member' or 'team leader' rather than 'officer', or 'director' rather than 'chief operating officer'. Each of these symbolic interventions fed into the overriding message that things were fundamentally different, new and more exciting. It was the birth of 'TEAM DYFFRYN'.

The radically new Team Dyffryn would encourage leadership in every part of the organisation. It would even introduce a leadership group and training programme to nurture emerging leaders and fine tune more experienced candidates. These practices, along with an innovative induction programme would be introduced via an expanded and reinvigorated HR department. Elsewhere, the continuous improvement programme would keep everyone focussed on improvement and further encourage participation and collaborative problem solving. Finally, a culture and practical framework of performance management encompassing an organisation-wide software package (IAPT and Business planning toolkit) and quarterly business reviews (QBRs) would promote performance towards the top of the agenda and keep everyone working in an effective and efficient manner. Strategic and operational planning would be part of the daily organisation of work tasks rather than a statutory

requirement ignored after publication. Collectively, this group of managerial policies and practices become known within Dyffryn CBC as John's 'private sector practices'. These headline practices, along with many other smaller interventions, will be the subject matter of the findings sections.

## **7.5 Discussion of organisational context and change**

### **7.5.1 Leadership and strategy**

Much of the early discussion revolved around the change process as a dramatic event. With Dyffryn CBC in turmoil following the corporate inspection and under threat of external regulation, the entrance of the new chief executive signalled a critical period in the council's status. The inspection had concluded that the organisation was incapable of improving in its existing form and therefore external intervention of some kind was the only option. The inherent uncertainties of this context setup the opportunity for a 'hero' transformation (Clarke et al., 1998). The self-assigned Captain of the 'Starship Enterprise', John was seen as the only person capable of transforming Dyffryn's performance. John's image of extensive experience and success in the private sector reinforced this perception. This allowed John to remain centre stage throughout the early change process and led to him being awarded hero status with the Wales leadership award. To a large extent, these circumstances legitimated John's leadership approach and allowed him to monopolise the change agenda and management discourse.

The *transformational strategic plan* was John's total concept of management to radically improve the organisation. This was a bundle of ideas encompassing the control system, functional structure, performance management, HRM and culture. This came to be known as 'John's private sector practices' and seemed to come as a universalistic philosophy of good management practice. John himself identified management discourse as a central feature of his approach. He replaced the 'old' local government vocabulary with a 'new' set of terms borrowed from the private sector. John displayed a distrust of the political processes intrinsic to public sector organisations. He showed particular distaste for councillors, stating 'they don't even need a GCSE, where are they supposed to get this wisdom from?' He believed that leadership should come from experienced managers and that the public sector needed

to be more performance driven like the private sector; arguing 'I think we should be more like Tesco'. This redirection would inform all other aspects of the change programme. The leader of the council had commented at one stage in the change, with positive connotations, that there had been a 'paradigm shift' within the organisation. However, the movement away from member-led processes such as consultation and planning towards managerialist processes of control and performance perhaps best characterised the shift. It was a shift from political processes to managerial processes.

A central aspect of the new approach was a discourse and work redesign based around teamworking. Along with the label of 'Starship Enterprise', the council had been re-branded 'Team Dyffryn'. With this came the discourse of *empowerment, horizontal structure, continuous improvement* and *employee involvement*. The Transformational strategic plan argued that the ethos of Team Dyffryn would break down long-term battles and remove the long-embedded 'blame culture'. However, here we can locate a central contradiction within John's approach that resurfaces throughout the analysis. On one hand there is the 'new' impatient, distrustful and innovative organisation that prized itself on the style of Tesco and places experienced leaders firmly in the driving seat of performance; while on the other hand there is Team Dyffryn and the Starship Enterprise where everyone is given a hand on the controls – where there is no need for a *command structure* nor *hierarchy* because empowered employees will somehow manage to coordinate their activities in a way that increases performance. Thus we have an approach that simultaneously promotes trust and distrust; strong leadership with soft empowerment. This contradiction surfaced in the transformational plan when council stakeholders were exhorted to become a team while at the same time informed that they have no choice because it was the last chance to save Dyffryn. Equally, John used the metaphor of a sports team for the workforce and said, 'you start in the team you cannot opt in ... [but] let it be known if you are one of the people standing on the side lines criticising it' stressing the moral burden being placed on employees to accept the approach and the conflicting message of authority within the organisation. Teamworking, through its anti-hierarchical stance, generally promotes increased worker volition and involvement in organisational decision making. However, John's approach was to tell his employees that they were a team and that they had no choice about it.

A common feature of both the teamworking and change literatures is exploring the motivation of managers for introducing new work systems. Mueller's (1994) economic, social and cultural objectives are perhaps most widely cited. Procter and Mueller (2000) argue that the distinguishing feature of teamworking in the last two decades has been its strategic nature and a strong focus on performance improvement. Thus, teamworking has been favoured as a way to increase productivity, efficiency or innovation. In the Dyffryn case it is difficult to point towards one clear objective of designing 'Team Dyffryn' because so much was promised about the new approach. Culture clearly featured in the new philosophy. Many metaphors were used to invoke oneness among the various departments. Everyone being on the same side and prioritising cooperation over competition was described as vitally important. The new vocabulary ostensibly contributed to a new culture. On the social side, John argued that employees would benefit from increased satisfaction of working in a high performing organisation. With clear roles and objectives team members would also be more motivated. On the performance side, a team approach promised more efficient project management, better inter-departmental communication and better decision making that would increase productivity and financial control. These would be reinforced by the other two dimensions. Thus, as Procter and Mueller (2000) observed, there was a strong emphasis on performance issues. In fact, a focus on performance was imperative considering the adverse context and climate in which John joined the organisation. Teamworking was seen as an effective way to introduce the broad strategic objectives of the transformation and also to quickly (and cheaply) introduce a new discourse of collaboration and performance. Re-labelling the whole organisation Team Dyffryn established a platform on which big promises could be made about the future of the organisation, such as to become 'world class within five years'. John's approach shares characteristics of wider trends in local government over the last few decades. A decrease in trust, increase in managerialism and performance focus are often seen as hallmarks of New Public Management and the Local Government Modernisation Agenda (Pollit and Bounkart 2000).

### **7.5.2 Influence tactics**

An interesting consideration in change programmes is the tactical methods senior management use to introduce and legitimise new work processes. We have already observed how the use of team language was used to place a moral burden on

employees - 'this is the last chance'. Various authors have differentiated managerial influence tactics as rational, hard, or soft (Douglas and Gardner, 2004; Tepper et al., 1998). Each approach has been observed to produce different employee experiences and met with different employee reactions. For example, Kipnis et al. (1980) argue that hard tactics based on management supervision and pressure will generate only limited conformity to new processes. In Dyffryn, John's soft and hard approach was experienced in different ways, similar to Knights and McCabe's (2000) 'bewitched, bewildered and bothered'. The approach was soft enough for some employees to buy into the Team Dyffryn concept as an essential programme of change and as John as hero chief executive. Some felt 'Team Dyffryn' was nothing new and that John simply 'talked a good talk'. While others were fearful of the new approach and worried about the future.

John's soft yet hard influence tactics evoke various metaphors that have been used in the HR literature. There are similarities with the 'iron fist in a velvet glove' (Watson, 1986: 180) and the 'wolf in sheep's clothing' (Keenoy, 1990). Both of these analogies approach the idea that the underlying harsh reality of managerialism is masked behind a more benign or generous appearance. Sinclair (1998) displays similar sentiments with specific reference to teamworking:

Team ideology tyrannizes because, under the banner of benefits for all, teams are frequently used to camouflage coercion under the pretence of maintaining cohesion; conceal conflict under the guise of consensus; convert conformity into a semblance of creativity; give unilateral decisions a co-determinist seal of approval; ...legitimize lack of leadership; and disguise expedient arguments and personal agendas. (p. 612)

On the surface Team Dyffryn appeared to be a hopeful redirection for the council, offering mutual benefits for employees and management. Yet underneath the reality was less appealing. Employees had no choice but to participate in the new approach. They were expected to accept on face value John's direction and trust his every word. They were obliged to accept the invitation yet were unable to have any influence over the outcome of events or in what part they played. Teamworking was unveiled to a fanfare and promised great benefit for every stakeholder; yet, as many other studies have found, the approach was misleading and was primarily used as a vehicle to introduce a more demanding performance regime (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). This does not mean that Dyffryn employees were more effectively controlled as a result of

the 'private sector practices' which ensued. As we will see shortly, work experiences depend significantly on control tactics and capabilities of individual line managers (Legge, 2005). Instead, the analysis demonstrates the function of a team approach at a strategic level. Teamworking can act as a lubricant for organisational change and ease resistance from concerned employees. The moral and social connotations of teams make the concept extremely difficult for employees to dismiss in the context of organisational change. This was particularly the case in the close-knit community of Dyffryn and the adverse history of the council. It was an effective means for John to legitimise his new approach and retain control of the organisation. However, this does not mean that John was a master tactician with everything under control since the success of Team Dyffryn was by no means unanimous. Due to the public responsibilities of leadership and the seduction of strategic power John held tightly to his highly personal 'total concept of management'. This did not allow him to recognise the subtleties, weaknesses or contradictions in the approach. If he appeared unsure about any aspect or admitted to internal contradictions in the strategy this would give the impression of weak leadership and would ruin his cherished hero status. This appears to be a major problem with all corporate 'change strategies'. Change is inherently unpredictable yet senior management must make it appear perfectly predictable and coherent. John's particular teamworking approach raises major issues about leadership, control and communication that we look at in more detail.

## CHAPTER 8

# Team environment and management

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the impact of the 'Team Dyffryn' approach on the day-to-day work activities within departments and teams. During the fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe at length the activities of two main teams and interview and/or observe in meetings and with short visits the management and work activities of more than ten teams.

### 8.2 Office setting

The physical setting for the main fieldwork was predominately within two contrasting council offices. Other buildings and offices were visited during the fieldwork, such as the council sports centre and social services department, but only on a few occasions. Most observations relevant to the literature were made within the Improvement Planning department, which is within the Corporate Centre directorate, and further observations were made in Business Services, within the Integrated Adult Services (IAS) directorate. Many other useful insights were gained through interviews with participants in a range of departments.

The improvement planning offices are based on the third floor of the main council building adjacent to the council solicitor and democratic services. The chief executive is based at the end of the same corridor. Also on this floor are committee rooms, the council chamber and several councillor facilities, such as the Mayor's parlour, leader's office, Members' library and Members' meeting room.

The office fittings and layout are standardised throughout the building. Some walls next to office entrances are decorated with service-related notice boards and posters. The notice boards are a recent development intended to provide communication for visitors and councillors on basic information about each service function, recent achievements and performance information. The notice boards are maintained to a

varying degree across the Civic Centre - some are brightly coloured and full of information; others are rather sparse and out-of-date.

There are three offices for Improvement planning – one for the head of service, one for the main team and a further small office for the communications part of the team. I was predominantly based in the main office. This has the approximate size of seven metres by six metres. There are three sections of desk around the edge of the office with an open area in the middle. One large desk is on the same side of the office as the door. This is separated from the other desks and faces into the room towards the other team members. It is where the team leader, Rhiannon, sits. I was told that this has recently been arranged to accommodate for Rhiannon, who is relatively new. A further three desks are positioned around the room with gaps between them to allow team members to move around easily. I was based on the desk immediately opposite the team leader. There are four members of staff based in the main office. This includes Rhiannon, Jen, Sue, and Ryan. Towards the end of the research, a new member of staff, Kevin, joined the team. The three female team members in this office are generally (and inoffensively) known as “the girls” by the male team members and employees outside of the department. The service manager, Barry, is in the adjacent office. The communication office is several rooms down the corridor. This is a small office where the communications officers, Danielle and Brenda, work. We will consider the role of each team member in the following chapter.

Each desk has the typical office equipment – PC and monitor, telephone, in-trays and various items of stationery. Besides everyone's desk there are small notice boards. These have a mixture of work-related print-outs and personal photos, postcards, and awards. There are five large wooden filing cabinets on one wall filled with paper files. There is also a main in-tray for the office which the mail room staff - usually Gareth - uses to deliver and collect mail for the department (this is too high for the girls to reach so Ryan usually has to help). Gareth often delivers trade journals and newsletters from external organisations which no one seems to read and they get passed from in-tray to in-tray (the head of service showed his surprise when he saw me flicking through one). There are also a large number of lever-arched files lined up on top of the filing cabinets. One corner has a few boxes of paper on the floor next to two large laser printers, label printer, shredder, and a couple of fans. Stuck on the wall



is a year planner which is used for displaying holidays and time off. Generally, the office has the feel that it is well used and occupied, but not disorganised or overly congested with paper. The door to the office is solid wood and it has a metal slide to signal if the office is 'free' (and thus open to visitors) or 'busy' (and requiring knocking or coming back at a later time). Every office door has this facility.

The other offices on the third floor, and on other floors of the Civic Centre, vary in size and layout but are aesthetically and functionally very similar to the improvement planning office and contain the same equipment. The mail room on the first floor is a particularly large office, housing around thirty members of staff, although the majority of offices house between three and eight people. On the notice board outside the improvement planning office are details about the mission of the service, CIP, Performance Management, DLG, performance indicators and QBRs. It is maintained about once every quarter, which seems fairly average going from the date of the information of the various Civic Centre notice boards.

It is expected that the environment and micro-level activities of individual teams will vary dramatically across council departments. It is therefore not the claim or intention of the following empirical evidence to provide a 'typical' or 'essential' picture of frontline teams within Team Dyffryn. However, the following observations can serve as a glimpse into what *can* happen within Team Dyffryn and hence a means of comparison against the claims of management and the formal rhetoric of reports. First we will consider the team office environment and the effect of this on work routines and behaviours. Next we will consider the team relationships that are facilitated through the office environment. Then the roles of team members will be considered and how these are conceptualised by management and workers themselves. Next we will consider formal team processes such as team meetings and other team events. We will consider how embedded these processes are in the routines of the office and the impact of team meetings on management control, work behaviours and attitudes. Finally, we will study the role of team management through the behaviour of the formal service manager and team leader. We will ask in what sense are management part of the team and how are they detached from routine team activities.

### 8.3 Improvement Planning Team

The Improvement Planning service, in its current configuration, has existed for eighteen months. With the initial restructure in 2004, the department was labelled 'Improvement Planning' but it then focussed predominantly on statutory performance data and the introduction of particular initiatives in the transformational plan, such as establishing the leadership group. Late in 2004 the function of equalities management (e.g. language translation and disability services) was introduced. Then in spring 2005 the director for the Corporate Centre reviewed the directorate and decided that a corporate communications function (e.g. public and media relations, internal communications) should be developed and this was duly added to the Improvement Planning department. According to Barry, the current head of Improvement Planning, 'the communications and equalities stuff was intended to give a customer focus to the service.' The development of the improvement planning team was mainly the result of internal appointments, with four members coming from different departments within the council. Two team members were brought in from outside of the organisation. The Improvement Planning intranet page states:

Dyffryn CBC is committed to providing continuously improving high-quality services that meet our customers' needs. The Improvement Planning section is involved in managing and co-ordinating the different actions currently being carried out. ...Improvement covers a huge range of different actions being taken to improve the way the council works and the services it offers to customers range from major changes, such as re-organising the Council's structure, to operational changes, such as saving paper by printing on both sides.

There is a long list of responsibilities highlighted on the intranet page including: performance management and indicators; policy agreement; Wales Programme for Improvement; QBRs; annual customer report; services assessments; CIP; efficiency review; DLG; community strategy; equalities and diversity; communications and consultation; and sustainable development. There is a large amount of external guidance about improvement activities from the Welsh Assembly and other regulatory/policy organisations, such as the audit office and IDeA. Barry identified the main strategies/policies that the service has to follow as: *Wales Spatial Plan* (2004), *Wales Programme for Improvement* (2002), *Making the connections* (2004), and *Delivering the connections* (2005). More locally, there are a plethora of reports and strategies that inform the council's improvement process including: Community

Partnership Strategy, Heads of the Valleys Partnership, annual Improvement plan, Agenda 21, annual Customer report, communication and marketing strategy, and internal performance management toolkit. As Barry notes,

Coordinating all the different strategies is a difficult job. It's important that they don't overlap. ...I think some of the reports are stopping in the future. We could say that they all feed into each other, from the community partnership strategy, right down to the business planning toolkit.

The team leader, Rhiannon, said that she turned the strategies into action plans by looking through each strategy report and picking out what she thought were the important parts. She then turned them into project plans with the help of some of the other team members.

There are eight members of the improvement planning team, including the service manager and team leader (there were seven for most of the fieldwork period as they employed Kevin, a second equality officer, in July 2006). The team includes Jen (also known as "Je"), Susan (also "Sue"), Rhiannon (also "Rhi"), Ryan ("Ry"), and in the communications office, Brenda ("Bre") and Danielle ("Da"), who are also known as "the com girls". The service manager Barry is only known as "Barry". The individual role of each team member is not overly specified and rigid yet everyone has one or a few areas that they focus most of their time and attention on. Jen focuses on equalities; Sue on events organising and administrative tasks; Rhiannon concentrates on communications; and Ryan spends most of his time on performance management and statutory performance indicators.

### **8.3.1 Office Working Environment**

Even though the office is fairly small, the environment is often loud and noisy with regular conversations between team members, individual telephone conversations, and frequent visits from other members of staff and councillors. The desks are close enough that every team member can speak to the others without moving from their chairs. During the first few days in the office, I was surprised by the amount of general conversation among team members and with visitors. This perhaps demonstrated my lack of experience working in open plan offices. Previous office experience had included working within a call centre, where noise is to be expected,

and within an engineering company, where individual working spaces were partitioned making conversations more difficult and noise to a minimum.

On the second day, I asked one of the team members, Jen, if the office was usually busy and loud, and whether Barry, the service manager, minded. Jen appeared surprised by the question and replied, “people always come in for a chat if they are passing ... Barry might say something if we kept talking all day, but otherwise he doesn’t mind us having a quick chat.” After a while, the environment was to be expected and it became more natural; visits by various people all part of the routine. There are regular visits by ten or so people, who often visit more than once a day. Frequent visitors include the chief executive’s personal assistant bringing gossip about the chief executive, several team members from adjacent offices, Gareth from the mail room, several councillors (including the previous Mayor), and the head of service for ICT. Then there is a group of around thirty people who visit less regularly, more like a few times per week.

To get to a feel for the daily number of visitors, I recorded an average of twenty visits per day from people outside the team. After the first few days of fieldwork, a diary entry demonstrated my surprise at the office environment:

*Lots of people came into the office to see people today. Jen, Sue and Rhi do most of the chatting during the day, mainly talking about non-work things. If I hadn’t been told Rhi was the team leader, I wouldn’t know this by the office activities. She didn’t display any clear supervising or managerial behaviours. ...I was surprised by the amount of chatting that goes on. I had thought people would be relatively quiet working and would chat every so often for a break. There were interruptions roughly every 10-15 minutes. No-one appeared under much stress or urgency to get things done.*

Apart from external visitors, team members have frequent social conversations with each other during the day. First thing in the morning is a popular time for chatting. This might be expected. Team members chat about what they watched on TV last night, what they had for dinner, whether they went out for the evening, etc. Most days there are catch-ups from 9.00 – 9:30. Monday’s catch-ups are longer – usually lasting 9:00 – 10:00. Visitors start coming in from around 9:30 each day for catch-ups.

The phone frequently rings for each team member. Rhi and Ryan probably get the most calls. Rhi might be on the phone for an hour a day and Ryan more like forty five

minutes. The other members get phone calls almost every day but tend to have briefer conversations. If a team member is out of the office when someone phones for them, another team member will answer after a few rings and take a message. They will also take a message if an external member of staff comes visiting the office for someone. Everyone in the team can view each other's work diaries on Microsoft Outlook so that meetings can be arranged easily and visitors can be informed where they are. The digital diaries appear to be well maintained for work commitments by most team members; there were no times during the fieldwork when someone was misinformed due to the diary records. Barry keeps most engagements on his diary – work and non-work.

Barry walks in about once an hour to see how people are getting on. Most visits are fleeting, he might say, "Is everything alright in here?" and then leave. However, he will sometimes enter with a sarcastic quip about the day or targeted at a particular team member and then have a light hearted exchange with one or more team members. If he is in a more serious mood, he will come in requesting the assistance of, or a meeting with, one or more team members. More of Barry's visits will be of the former, more informal kind than the latter, serious kind. The communications girls come into the office once or twice a day for around fifteen minutes. Visits are regarding work about fifty per cent of the time.

If I were to report an average working day, I would estimate that for around sixty per cent of the time (around five hours per day) there are disturbances and noise which distract team members. More than half of this (around three hours) is non-work related, general chatting. This observation may not be unusual for open plan office environments. However, the impact of this on team activities was noteworthy, particularly at times when individual team members felt under pressure to complete work tasks or projects. For example, on the third day of the fieldwork Ryan requested to work from home because he had some work to finish for the end of the week. In his words:

I've got a deadline at the end of this week so I'm gonna work from home tomorrow. ...I get twice as much done at home where its quiet and I might be able to work in the garden for a bit, even get a tan. I better be careful not to burn my head!

Every team member worked from home on one or more occasions during the fieldwork for similar reasons to Ryan. They did so about once a month. At another time Jen commented,

We should be able to work from home when we want to. I can get done in three hours at home what I do in eight here. I'll be honest, I haven't got the discipline to do it all the time, but when I work at home I can get so much sorted.

The main reason put forward was less noise and distractions affecting concentration in the office environment. The department had a laptop available that individual team members could take off site when needed. Barry allowed people to work from home and remarked when asked about flexible working, "It's not a problem for people to work from home when they need to. The trust is there in my team." There did not seem to be regular complaints about the noise but it was one of the first things people mentioned when they were under strain. It seemed ironic that when someone wanted to get their work done in 'Team Dyffryn' they had to remove themselves from the team environment.

On a few occasions, the issue of noise did seem to impact on team relationships. One day, Rhi asked the office if people minded her putting on some music quietly at her desk (in a way that would be audible to everyone). Everyone was in the office at their desk but no-one answered, keeping their heads down or on their computer screens. She then said it again but louder. Sue reacted slowly, and said quietly (in a timid manner) "Oh ...I don't mind." None of the others looked up or answered so Rhi took this as a no and decided not to put it on. She looked a little upset by this, particularly as no-one had acknowledged her. This suggested that at times team members did show that they wanted to get on with their work and did not appreciate distractions and noise, particularly playing music or other explicit interruptions. This observation of Rhi reinforced my initial interpretation that she did not display leadership or supervisory behaviours that might be expected in a 'team leader'. Rather than acting as an agent for management by supervising and encouraging hard work and productivity among her team, she sometimes adding further distractions which lowered productivity. On another occasion, Rhi's phone was ringing many times repeatedly while she was out of the office in a meeting. Sue had to take messages for her; she grumbled,

I wish Rhi would put on her answer phone. I'm taking her calls for her all the time and I feel like a donkey. I'm just taking messages they could leave on her answer phone.

On another occasion, Jen lamented that Improvement Planning has many distractions because the department links with many other departments in everything they do – performance management, equalities, communication – they are all council-wide initiatives. She said that some departments hardly have any interruptions.

The other improvement planning office is around the corner to the main office and on the same floor. I spent a few hours in this office on a few different days to get a feel for it. This office is smaller than the main office with only two team members working there. They are separated from the rest of the team, firstly because there is not enough room for them in the main office, but also because they “work on confidential issues” (Danielle) to do with the press and “work to tight deadlines” (Brenda) with press releases and therefore need a quiet environment. Often their office door shows the status of ‘busy’. Brenda and Danielle help each other out submitting press releases, writing the monthly staff magazine, working on councillor speeches, and researching media publications. However, they appear to work in a quieter and more focussed environment than the main office, largely to do with their work pressure and less distractions. They frequently remark that they are stressed or fed up and Danielle occasionally tells Rhi that she cannot cope with the workload. In this way, less distractions, and therefore less casual chatting, produces a work environment that is more productive but also more stressful for the ‘Com Girls’.

In summary, the improvement planning office environment is busy and socially lively. There are many micro-routines, such as social catch-ups, breaks and visitors. These often run like clockwork; you almost miss them if they don't occur. We will now consider the team relationships which are formed within this environment.

### **8.3.2 Team relationships**

Much of the evidence collected suggests that team members have comfortable and enjoyable working relationships. The interactions among all team members are cordial and free-flowing. As suggested above, they are often engaged in sociable conversation and joking in pairs or as a group. There is a distinctive informality about the team,

with each team member being known by shortened single-vowel forms of their names. For example, Ryan is known as “Ry” and Jen is sometimes known as “Je” (enunciated with a short, sharp sound). Everyone is shortened in this manner apart from Barry, who is always described by his full name, possibly demonstrating respect or more formality as the manager. Most of the team members have known each other for some time and have worked in the team for a few years together. Sue says she knew Ryan when he was running around bumping into things as a toddler. Rhi is the newest member and has been in the department for about ten weeks (at the start of the fieldwork). She is in the office less than the other three because she is often attending meetings. She has a conversational style that is a little more formal than the others.

The reality of work for much of the Improvement Planning team is digital information processing. In other words, sitting behind desktop PCs working on MS Excel spreadsheets, MS Word documents or Email applications. Individual tasks are usually working towards a team-level responsibility or goal, such as drafting a statutory council report, performance indicator document or intranet content. In this formal sense, there is little task-based interdependence because working on a PC is an individual process. Interdependence is therefore largely in the form of outcomes. The team has attempted to overcome this in some instances by using a projector in meetings so that digital documents can be viewed by the whole team on a screen and therefore ‘worked-on’ together in real time (this will be discussed shortly). However, when in their default position behind individual desks and monitor screens, team members have little opportunity for task-based interaction. Routine, albeit minor, exceptions to this include helping behaviours when a team member requests assistance from someone else. For example, Ryan is generally known as the “IT whiz kid” on the team. Often Sue has problems with functions within Word or spreadsheet documents, such as “How do I stick a watermark on the Word doc?” Ryan always comes to her assistance within a few minutes. Sue is seen as the one good at administrative tasks, such as typing up letters, organising meetings or purchasing stationery and often opts to do these tasks for the team. In this sense, there tends to be “the one who does...” denoting an informal division of roles within the team beyond any formal function. Barry also makes use of this tacit pool of skills, coming in to ask Ryan about IT issues and getting Sue to type his letters or organise meetings. It sometimes appears that Sue operates like Barry’s secretary. She will organise and



serve refreshments at his meetings, organise the furniture before an event and go into town to buy his lunch, often purchasing 'the usual'. In addition to this tacit interdependence, team members will attempt to help each other out when others are under stress. For example towards the end of the fieldwork in this office, Ryan was getting worried about finishing some work before he was going on holiday. Sue reacted by making him cups of tea and being especially quiet. She also closed the office door for some time as a move to discourage visitors.

Team members use each other as general 'social buffers' – letting off steam and having a moan when someone has annoyed them and when they have some worries. They will discuss any proposed changes in work and what it will mean for them. For example, the HR department was introducing a new sickness absence policy and procedure and the team were discussing how they thought it was terrible. People will also use gossip or general conversation to survive the bore of routine tasks and aid team cohesion. Everyone has their favourite topic for gossip. For Rhi it is the staff netball team and how there are some players who can't even catch the ball. She talks about the petty-politics of running the netball team and how there are many arguments about who should be in the first team. As far as I can tell, this doesn't lead to any work-specific issues with Rhi because she is in a different department to most of the other players. However, this could potentially weaken work relations if the netball team disputes were to spill over to working relationships. Informal conversation often serves as an informative device for the whole team on work issues and news. As such, when someone returns from a meeting or other event, they will usually inform the team in a casual manner about what happened and any important outcomes. As might be expected, the reportage of meetings usually has a personal spin rather than a balanced assessment, such as, "[So and so] was being a right pain in the arse and [so and so] just couldn't be bothered with it all." This seems to reinforce team cohesion and places the responsibility of every team member as team informant. It provides a form of social scorekeeping and regulation providing each team member with a specific mental model of the organisation and an understanding of whom outside the team can and cannot be trusted. On many issues that I enquired about, the team appears to hold a strong group consensus or collective memory. In this sense, there are clear boundaries between the 'in-group' and 'out-group'. This is noticeably a

problem for the wider 'Team Dyffryn' agenda where an ethos of oneness in encouraged at every level of the organisation.

Interviews revealed that the team had not always operated in a harmonious manner. Barry referred to something called the "toxic element" within the team. This was a previous team member who caused low morale and negativity through her pessimistic attitudes and behaviours. Apparently she caused many problems by arguing with the team and managers. Barry informed me that he managed to push her out by effectively saying "we haven't got a place for you here." The team also seemed to hold a consensus that she was a "bad egg". Rhi mentioned that she wanted a reference from her or Barry. Sue replied heatedly, "I'll give her a bloody reference, stupid bitch."

### 8.3.3 Team roles

During an interview with Barry and Rhi I asked them about the role of the individual team members. Barry reflected,

The team has different roles and abilities. We don't need 11 Stephen Gerrards, you only need one. The team members have different skills so we have Ryan who is good with Excel and he does the PIs, we have Brenda and Danielle who can do press releases, speeches and stuff like that.

Barry likes using sporting analogies about teams. His reference to Stephen Gerrard, his favourite English football player, was used a number of times to suggest that teams work best with a range of different characters and skills rather than having everyone with the same set of skills or style. Rhi continued:

We play to people's strengths but we don't want people doing the same thing all day because this will get very boring...

Barry interjected:

We can't be too flexible but people will do different tasks and we try to vary it. Individual team members don't have specific job titles; they are all project officers and called team members. We let people get on with things and sometimes let them take a risk.

When asked what kind of risks they might take and any examples Barry talked about the new performance management system. He said that Jen in the team made the suggestion that instead of updating the performance management software only every few months, that they update it more regularly. However, later discussion revealed

that this was an idea that came up through CIP (see chapter 11) and it was therefore unclear in what way it was taking a 'risk'. There were no other examples given of taking a 'risk' after asking in different interviews and meetings with Barry.

Barry suggested that understanding team roles is also about managing personalities:

Danielle sometimes doesn't know what is going on work-wise and Sue can worry about things. Ryan on the other hand can just get on with things. They all have different ways of working and we have to think about that as managers.

On whether team members know each other's strengths, Rhi simply suggested "This is getting better." It was a regular occurrence for team members to give short answers of this kind when they were either unsure or did not want to elaborate. Barry, Rhi and Ryan would often reply to questions about team capabilities with "we are getting there slowly", "it's getting better" or "we are moving in the right direction". Barry liked to strengthen this kind of reply by saying "we can't do everything at once". However, this euphemistic jargon was not used with reference to other teams. Instead, it would be "they are terrible", "unreliable", "getting worse", etc. This again provided further evidence of in-group/out-group attitudes and remaining tendencies of a 'blame culture'.

Barry provides some further clarification of his management philosophy and perspective on team roles:

I think there is a good work-life balance in my team. If they were working all day and night here then there would be a problem. But we have people...

Rhiannon [interrupts]:

Playing netball, watching Take That, going on picnics, going on holiday.

Barry:

Yep ...and watching Portugal versus Holland on TV. To manage the workload we have flexible working so that people can work from home. There is total trust on my part here. I sometimes come in on Saturday mornings and the stuff I can get done in three hours then is usually a lot compared to what I can do in the week here.

Barry used the notion of flexible working and 'trusting' his team as a positive reflection of his team environment and the responsibility of his team members. However, he seemed unaware of the reality of the office environment and why his team frequently asked to work from home to get away from distractions.

Regarding the team being split into two offices, Barry pointed out:

There is a challenge to get the team working together and at the same time keeping important things like confidential matters and tight deadlines apart. Office relocation has been on the cards for a long time.

I also asked Barry if what I had seen (over the period of six weeks) could be described as typical of work activities in the office and roles of the team. He said that it was fairly typical. When asked the same question, Sue said that I had not seen the team working at their best. She reflected:

When we have to write the improvement report we are all working together like mad. Last year we were finishing it off twenty minutes before the deadline! We can really pull together when we need to.

However, the improvement report is usually written in several drafts throughout the year and the final draft is submitted in October. It was the process of collating and editing the final draft that Sue was referring to. Furthermore, the positive gloss of pulling together when they need to was surely a symptom of poor project planning and management. This was one of John's key 'transformational' priorities.

In an interview with Barry about team roles, he concluded his discussion with almost self-doubting repetition:

We have good staff in this team. I hope that is something you will conclude. I think we do work well together and that is easier because we are a small team. We are not perfect but I think everyone has intelligence and a good work attitude. Well I did employ most of the team! We are a good team.

The appealing image Barry and Rhi depicted about team roles and responsibilities heavily contradicted everyday observations within the team. Perhaps the starkest example was one afternoon when Rhi was running around complaining that she had so much work to do and how she could not cope, while at the same time, Jen spent the afternoon sticking fancy labels onto every one of her lever-arch folders using a labelling machine. She even printed out some of them two or three times so she could get them "perfectly straight and neat". Rhi didn't attempt to get Jen involved with helping her or ask whether indeed she needed to spend several hours using the label machine for her folders. Meanwhile, Barry was sitting in his office next door, unaware of the bipolar experiences of his team members.

### 8.3.4 Meetings and team events

The team has several regular meetings scheduled to review various strategic and operational concerns. These include a fortnightly meeting with the whole team, chaired by Barry; a fortnightly ‘work planning’ meeting with the main office led by Rhiannon; and a weekly meeting with the communications side of the team in the other office, again led by Rhiannon. In addition, there are special meetings and events organised to discuss particular issues, such as meetings to discuss the improvement report or for some other team development purpose.

The main team meeting was scheduled in everyone’s diaries for 9:30-10:00 every other Thursday morning. There is a public network drive where everyone can add items to the meeting agenda beforehand. During the six weeks in Improvement Planning I should have observed three team meetings. On the first scheduled Thursday Barry came into the office at 9:15 to say he hadn’t put anything on the agenda “so as long as nobody has got anything profound to talk about, we won’t have a team meeting.” Two weeks later a meeting was held on Wednesday morning specifically to discuss the development of the annual improvement report. This meant that they did not have a team meeting on the following day. Then two weeks later again, other meetings that were being held replaced the ‘regular’ meeting. It was surprising that the team needed, in Barry’s words, something “profound” to talk about in order for a regular meeting to take place. In this sense, meetings were not a high priority for the team and individual members did not appear to benefit from them as they did not add things to the agenda.

#### *Improvement report meeting*

The improvement report meeting was held to discuss the strategy for completing the final draft of the report due in October. Everyone sat around the large desk in Barry’s office. There was a projector pointed towards a wall displaying an excel file, which was the IAPT (improvement action planning toolkit) for the improvement report. This was a file with rows of tasks to be completed going down the page with columns such as ‘completion date’, ‘main contact’, ‘percentage complete’, etc. across the page. Ryan informed me that he originally created the file and then consulted with the in-house auditors to make sure they were happy with it. For those familiar with project management software, such as Microsoft Project, it was a written in similar format to

this, with tasks being broken down into subtasks on a timeline of deadlines. Ryan sat at the laptop and updated the file while everyone else viewed the amendments on the projected image. Barry started talking through the document giving his advice and saying things like “change that line to...”, “delete that”, “insert a new task row in there”. The others added points or comments where they felt necessary, but most of the talking was done by Barry and Rhi. When someone made a suggestion, Barry would usually say something to register the thought, such as “Right, yeah” and then carry on with what he was talking about. As such, the first fifteen minutes of discussion was mainly led by Barry with little group discussion or problem solving. When Rhi made suggestions, such as “we need to organise it like...” Barry largely ignored, or at least did not comment on, her suggestions. This suggested a closed style of management. There was no real attempt by Barry to garner the thoughts of the team. The main concern was to get through the document as quickly and efficiently as possible. Whether this reflected John’s ‘star ship enterprise’ model of organisation was highly questionable.

After the discussion on the IAPT file, attention turned to organising the various roles of the team in writing, editing and printing the document. It was agreed that Rhi would manage the formatting and design of the publication and she would contact the reprographics department to get it printed. Barry would check the Audit Commission guidance about the purpose of the report. Ryan would try to bring together the performance data but they would have to organise meetings with each directorate about their contributions to the report. The report contained sections on the progress of each department so it was crucial to get respective directors and service managers involved and informed about when they needed to write up something. This organising process with external managers was seen as a risk that the team had to mitigate. Rhi commented: “We have to cover our backs. It’s one of the first things you learn in an office!” Sue added, “If we schedule in meetings with each directorate and let them know what is going on we can say to the Audit Commission, ‘What else could we do?’” Rhi replied, “We have to get it to run smoothly. Smarter not harder, smarter, not harder – that’s our mantra!” Sue was worried about bringing it all together on time. She said, “If we all sit down together in one room on different laptops, I think we could get the bulk of it done in one day.” Barry did not respond to Sue’s suggestion but tried to round up the discussion by saying they will send out

some emails today to give people good notice and he has freed up most of August to focus on the report to make sure it is finished on time. The meeting ended but as they were walking out Sue was clearly agitated and worried about getting the report completed. She complained to Jen,

We have to be realistic about this. He [Barry] did this last year, only gives people a week to do this and that. It takes longer. We go on holiday at different times and it's gonna be really stressful again at the end.

Sue comments clearly demonstrated a problem in team management. She felt powerless to do anything about her concerns as Barry did not seem to take her seriously. He called her “a worrier”. Instead, she just sat in the main team office complaining to the other team members how they were approaching the task wrongly and how Barry wouldn't listen to her. The other team members showed agreement with Sue but were not as adamant about the situation. Jen and Ryan had an attitude closer to ‘yeah its rubbish, nuts that's life’. Rhi did not seem to occupy any leadership role as a mediator between management and team concerns. If anything, she didn't seem to inculcate respect from either camp – she was stuck in ‘no man's land’.

### *Work planning meeting*

The work planning meeting is regarded as an ‘operational’ meeting conducted by Rhi every two weeks. During the fieldwork period they only held one of these meetings. There is a longstanding agenda that people could add to where necessary. If a particular item wasn't applicable one week they just skiped over it during the meeting I observed. Rhi started the meeting in a formal fashion – “right team, first item.” Sue informed the group that she had updated the wall display outside of the office and Rhi replied somewhat patronisingly, “that's a gold star for Sue!” she continued this style saying things like “We like our quick ideas within the service, don't we team!” One of the items lower down the agenda was ‘fortnightly deadlines’. Everyone informed the team individually what work they had coming up in the next week. If they had a worry or problem, Rhi would give advice, such as “Right, you will need to start screening off time for that so you can start making progress.” Ryan informed the group that he would be away on holiday for a week. Rhi asked if he needed cover for him on anything he was working on. Ryan replied that he usually has a message on his phone saying “I'm away but if you have anything urgent, contact Sue.” The last item on the agenda was “personal work system”. Rhi was interested to find out how

everyone else organised their work between digital copies of the network and hard copies in filing cabinets. There was apparently no team policy/procedure on this and Rhi thought it should be clarified. The team had a range of responses; some kept all work only on the network, while others were a mix. Sue suggested that they take two days off the calendar and set aside especially to sort out their filing systems. Ryan and Jen agreed with this. Rhi ended the meeting: “thank you team! We got through that very effectively. We’re a star team!”

This meeting showed the first clear sign of Rhiannon as team leader. The procedure was that Rhi would report back to Barry if anything noteworthy came out of the meeting. Generally, the meeting was an opportunity for the team to monitor their workload and for Rhi to keep informed about any potential work problems. This seemed to work to some extent, although rather than sorting out any issues in the meeting, the strategy adopted was to largely suggest that the team put time aside to deal with this in the future. Thus, regular meetings were seen as a forum to identify problems rather than provide solutions. Solutions were developed in further, specially assigned, meetings.

### *Team development*

On the first Friday within the Improvement Planning team Barry had scheduled a ‘team development day’. This was going to be a half-day off-site including everyone in the team to discuss recent progress and talk about improving the effectiveness of team processes. It was also intended as an informal gathering for the team to socialise and have a chance to relax in each others company. In this sense, it was also seen as a chance for ‘team building’. Any self-important thoughts of ‘has this been put on for my benefit?’ were duly debunked as Ryan mentioned that they hardly ever have anything like this but this event was planned several months before. It was therefore serendipitous that I had started the fieldwork in this week. The day was funded through the Improvement Planning departmental budget and was independent of any training or development initiatives managed by the HR department.

The itinerary for the day was put together by Jen after a short meeting with Barry about the purpose of the day. Jen started writing the itinerary on Wednesday morning. When she had put together a draft along with a map to the venue she emailed it to Rhi



saying “Can you have a look at and see what you think”. Rhi had a quick look and said, “Yeah it looks really good Jen. Maybe we should add an icebreaker at the start to make it less stiff and starchy.” They discussed what an icebreaker might involve. Jen then added the extra details and emailed the document to Barry for further comments. Barry was happy with the itinerary and running order so Jen then sent it out to the rest of the team. The itinerary read as follows:

**Table 3 Team Development Day Itinerary**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Time Allocation</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>
9.00 am	1	Ice Breaker	You thought you knew the team until now... Bring a quirky fact about yourself	15 mins	Rhi
9:15 am	2	Team Roles and Responsibilities	Each team member to brief the group as to what each others roles and responsibilities are	35 minutes (5 mins per person)	Ry
9:50 am	3	Skills Matrix	Determine what skills the team has, what skills need to be developed and an opportunity to identify what training you may require.	20 minutes (joint task)	Da
10:10 am	4	Highs & lows	Each team member to think of 3 things they love about their job and 3 things they hate about their job. This exercise will give the team an opportunity to support and potentially ease any troubles team members may be having by suggesting alternatives or solutions.	90 minutes (just over 10 minutes per team member)	Bre
11:40 am	5	SWOT	Revisit the SWOT analysis carried out earlier this year.	30 minutes (joint task)	Mark
12:10 pm	6	Mission Impossible	Each team member to bring along to the day a mission statement for the section.	30 minutes	Sue
12:40 pm	7	Lunch and Feedback	Please take 5 minutes to complete the forms and return them before you leave. Take as long as you want to eat the delightful food on offer.		Barry

On the Wednesday afternoon, Sue rang around to book a local caterer for the team day. Sue, Ryan and Jen then started to have a chat about the day and what it might be like. They were also talking about the food and how some members of the team are so fussy about what they eat. Sue said to the others, "I wish we were doing something more fun like building yachts. ...what we are doing will be boring." She either was not aware, or did not mind showing her disappointment anyway, in the presence of Jen who had devised the itinerary for the day only a few hours earlier. Jen didn't react in any way. Sue seemed to blame Barry for the planning of the day, continuing: "...but Barry is useless with everything though!" She said this in an offhand manner, not with any particular malice or aggression. Ryan also suggested that it would be more fun doing something like tenpin bowling. He said, "Its good to relax with your workmates sometimes rather than always talking about work issues. I hate it when, you know, you go to the council Christmas dinner and you get stuck next to someone who just want to talk about work - so dull!"

For most of Thursday in the office, the looming team day was the main topic of conversation. They were discussing various aspects of the itinerary and several team members were worrying about what they had to do. Sue was complaining about most of the itinerary, especially the mission statement: "Its shit. I know we have to do it but what am I gonna say – I'm fed up with photocopying for Barry? What's he gonna do?" Sue was fairly aggressive with her comments. Jen tried to calm Sue's irritation saying "Well if you bring it up he's got to do something about it." Sue resignedly responded, "yeah... I suppose." Later on in the morning, Sue made a similar complaint to Rhi. Acting as the team leader, Rhi tried to give Sue managerial advice, saying "It's the purpose of the day to thrash out any problems." Sue desired regular reassurance and often expressed her concerns. She then said to Rhi that it will at least be a chance to tell Barry that she hasn't seen him much recently.

In the afternoon they began talking about the team day again. Ryan was concerned about what he was going to say for the team roles and mission statement parts. He said "I think I'm going to work on it this afternoon."

Jen replied, "Yeah I think I will too."

Ryan: "If you are put on the spot sometimes it is difficult so I am going to work on some of those answers for tomorrow now. Do you think there will be any problems tomorrow, Jen? I think mines gonna be quite straight forward."

Jen: "I don't think so. Should be OK"

Ryan and Jen both spend several hours during the afternoon writing up their personal mission statements and going through their skills matrices. Jen read her mission statement out to Ryan: "Here we go: Jen... putting the 'me' in 'Improvement". Ryan seemed very impressed by this and remarked "Oh, mines gonna be boring and no good in comparison to that!"

Jen looked quite proud of herself and said, "Naaa! Mines so cheesy, it's like something you would hear on a TV advert."

Ryan: "No, that's good that is Jen. You would be good writing newspaper headlines!"

Sue came into the office and hearing the other two talking about it, she started worrying again. She rang her husband to ask him if he had any ideas about things that she could tell everyone tomorrow for the icebreaker. She exclaimed, "I've been here for twenty years, I have nothing they don't know about me!" These observations suggested that team members saw the team day tasks as forms of scrutiny and assessment. Rather than an opportunity for the team to work together on these issues in an open and constructive way, they thought that had better prepare individually for each task so that they weren't "put on the spot". This was surely going against the purpose of the day for the team to develop and work as a group rather than as individuals.

### *The team day*

Everyone met in the office at 8:30am on the Friday ready to travel to the team day venue. The formal work dress had been relaxed so people were wearing jeans, T-shirts, and trainers. Everyone squeezed into a few team member's cars and we travelled about five miles to the 'Integrated Children's Centre' which was a council owned property that had recently been revamped. The team day was based in one of the meeting rooms, which was a typical office meeting room with tables around the edge and a projector and large screen on one wall. Barry was already in the room when the rest of the team arrived. The team came in and sat quite spread out around the room, everyone roughly facing into the middle of the room but in view of the projector screen. The session started at 9:00am on the dot with Barry giving a short

introduction, saying “this will be a good opportunity for us to discuss things in a more informal environment and help us develop as a team.” He seemed a bit unsure of the order of events so he left it to Jen to describe the itinerary and introduce the first item. Jen ran through the order of events on the printed itinerary sheet (fig 3) and told Rhi that she was leading the first session – the icebreaker. Rhi said that Barry should start so Barry talked about how he had been sacked three times in his early career. They then moved around the room: Sue told a story about dancing at a local pub when she was younger; Rhi told a story about her watch being wrong one day in a previous job so she went home from work an hour early and was so embarrassed about it; and so on... They all seemed to enjoy each others stories and this supplied fluidity to the conversation that they could take into the following activities.

The second activity was ‘Team role and responsibilities’. Considering that everyone had appeared relaxed during the icebreaker, it was surprising that a few team members seemed nervous during this activity. Ryan was facilitating this session so he started. He had prepared a statement of his role the previous afternoon and just read through it with a rushed urgency. It was hard to follow and nobody asked any questions about it. The group went around in a similar fashion reading from prepared statement with no discussion. Barry was the only one not to use notes and he described his role as: “leadership, people management, integrating the service together and linking with other strategic objectives.” This session was planned to last for approximately 35 minutes but was finished closer to 10 minutes.

The third session was called the ‘Skills Matrix’. This involved using the PC and projector. They loaded up an Excel file table (extract shown in figure 4). A list of ‘type of work’ goes down the table in rows, while the team members go across the page in columns. The final column of the right records the percentage of the team that had a tick next to each skill (e.g. Word: 100%). The whole table records 40 ‘types of work’ rows similar to the ones illustrated below. This session ran very slowly and was quite frustrating to participate in. Brenda sat at the PC and went through the rows;

Brenda: “right – Microsoft Word. Barry?”

Barry: “Yep”

Brenda: “Jen?”

Jen: “Yep”

Etc.

This process was a combination of the individual team member perceiving their skill level and the rest of the group adding comments, such as “Yeah, you’re good at that...” The way they programmed the file so that the spreadsheet calculated the sum of the group skill attainment made completing the simple tick box a slow process. Each time, Brenda had to right click the box under someone’s name and then define the cell equation that ‘tick = 1’ (in order for the total and then percentage calculation to work). So each tick took thirty seconds to apply. As one can imagine, there was a lot of sitting around and nobody really contributing. They did not define what the ‘type of work’ comprised in relation to behavioural/attitudinal skills. For example, Ryan was the only one who claimed to deserve a tick under Excel even though Brenda was facilitating this very session using Excel. There was also no consideration of whether individual team members required every skill on the list. It was assumed that every team member needed to learn every skill that had been displayed. This was strange, considering that some of the skill lower in the list were things like writing press releases – specific communication officer skills.

**Table 4 Extract from Training Needs Analysis session**

<b>Type of work:</b>	<b>Barry</b>	<b>Jen</b>	<b>Ryan</b>	<b>Sue</b>	<b>Rhi</b>	<b>Danielle</b>	<b>Brenda</b>	<b>Trained</b>	
Word	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	100%
Access			✓					1	14%
Excel			✓					1	14%
Outlook	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	100%
Internet Explorer	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	100%
Printer	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	100%
Ordering Stationery		✓	✓	✓		✓		4	57%
Ordering Furniture		✓		✓			✓	3	43%
ICT Requests	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	7	100%
Printing Requests		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	86%

The process of going through each row for every team member took approximately forty minutes (twice the planned time) so this put the itinerary back on schedule. Team members claimed to possess around half of the skills displayed. Towards the end of the session, they had a brief discussion about how they would go about developing the skills they were lacking. Sue made the suggestion that maybe the team

members who were good at certain skills could teach the ones who were lacking. Barry appeared ambivalent about this suggestion and said, “No, I think I will have to speak to HR first about the training budgets and plans.” They left it at that.

The third session was ‘Highs and Lows’. The format was again to tour around the group. The purpose was for each team member to provide an honest insight into aspects of their work that they enjoyed and aspects they disliked. Danielle started:

My highs are: interesting work; enjoyable team to work in; getting good experience. My lows: stress from work pressure; other departments or people coming in and expecting us to do stuff at the drop of a hat; people not taking you seriously. Roger [service manager in planning] comes in and sees me typing and he says ‘Oh, I haven’t got time for media’.

Barry made a suggestion:

Yeah, we can be seen like the dentists sometimes – only go to when you have a problem. Some things are difficult to talk about with councillors but we are here to help. Maybe put it on the intranet, you know, ‘Do you know what improvement planning do?’

This kind of information was already on the intranet.

Rhi added:

It’s about other people respecting your workload. You need to be able to say, ‘Sorry I can’t help you, I’ve really got to get this done.’

Barry:

Try and do it if we can, but communicate back to them after to say we can’t have that again. It’s sometimes difficult to say no, but we need to be consistent and persuasive. It’s about people skills.

Rhi:

If you find it difficult you can direct them to me and I will help.

Barry:

Use your common sense, so you can learn when you need to say no. It’s about communication. Go back to them to say please give us a bit more notice in future. Is that any help?

Danielle nodded, although she looked incredulous about the suggestions and how likely they would help her improve her work experience.

Rhi:

We will follow up on these lows to see what we can do about it.

Sue was next in line. She continued:

My highs: being able to lead things and having my own areas of expertise; challenge of the job; and flexibility of the work [she later admitted that her husband helped her write these up]. ...My lows on the other hand: people from other departments not understanding my workload and wanting me to do things; and my low confidence if I am doing things right - I worry about how well I am doing.

Rhi:

We are a small team and we can help each other out if you suddenly break your leg (this was not a condition for help, but an example of a scenario when help would be available).

Sue:

Yeah, I know. Ryan is good at Excel and that's what we need to do work on. So he does help me when I need it. He is good! [Ryan smiled]

Barry:

There is a personality issue working with people in other departments. We have our dinosaurs that are difficult to deal with. I suppose I am sometimes to blame, coming in to Sue and saying can you photocopy this or that and it might just be an aspect of education I need.

Rhi admitted that she sometimes treated Sue like a secretary.

Barry:

We all have areas where we might not have self-confidence but we need to work together and celebrate our successes. That should help your self-confidence [looking to Sue]. Does that help?

Sue looked unsure.

Barry was next to go:

Highs - I enjoy when we have done something well as a team. I think, sometimes take a risk don't always be so safe all the time. Sometimes go off the wall and try something different and I will support you on that. Tell me what you are doing and I will support you.

Rhi interjected:

We make mistakes but they need to be done so we can improve. I like the saying - 'If you always do what you've always done, you will always get what you always got' [Barry looked bemused]

Ryan added:

Yeah, you need to make mistakes to learn from things.

Barry continued with his highs:

...I like being asked my opinion on things sometimes. I think that's quite a compliment. You know, asking "do you know about" or "how do you think I should approach this". But there are plenty of things that the team will know that I don't, so it works both ways. This department has changed and improved. I've been able to appoint people. That's because I work with exciting and lively people. I have worked with people as dull as mud water but that's not the case here. My Lows - petty politics is a pet hate. People being precious and laughing at you. Also, not being able to do what I want to do; the frustration of not being able to do things.

Ryan was next:

Highs - well the ladies a big plus! [groans from the girls] The variety of the job and flexibility. Also learning and gaining experience. My lows - no clear career progression; no specific professional qualifications; and not being able to work easily with other teams.

Barry's comments about Ryan's lows:

By the nature of the work, I don't know if you need to do that [professional qualification] and I don't think there will be anything like that. I think a paper qualification doesn't always mean much. Some jobs you need a qualification

and others you don't need one whatsoever. The balance of experience and development on the job can be much more useful in a job like this. I have a masters, but all it does is gives you a line on your CV but nothing else. It doesn't get you further. Focus should be on competence rather than on a qualification.

Rhi:

On-the-job training can get you just as much skill training as anything else.

Barry:

The important thing is to have skills that are right for the team. There is no use having 11 Gerards [referring to the footballer Stephen Gerard again, preferring instead to have people who complement each other]. I think you are doing fine for the skills of the team and your contribution. Is that ok Ryan?

Ryan smiled.

Rhi followed from Ryan:

Right, my highs: the people I work with - I like having a laugh and a sense of humour and I enjoy helping people. I like making a change. I like the variety. You know, one minute you're photocopying, next your working on a strategic process, then maybe creativity and photography. It's great.

... Lows: getting interrupted by people from other departments with stupid things. Workload is difficult - trying to swim and not sink. And then working with negative people, loose cannon, annoying people, and small-minded people.

Barry:

How can we deal with that? Are we just taking it? Should we talk to them?

Rhi:

I organised a meeting this week to discuss with someone how we need to work more effectively. Since M D squared [management training programme] I have been more assertive, haven't I?

Danielle:

I think we need to do that more.

Barry:

Are we establishing a pattern here? We always want to be helpful, etc, etc. but underneath we need a bit of steel, you know, saying 'don't push me on this'.

Sue:

I think some people you give them an inch and they will take a mile.

Barry:

Well I'm not gonna offer you all a team hug every morning, but it's that kind of approach. We need to look out for each other.

Brenda was the penultimate team member to go:

My highs - I've been in lots of departments over the last twenty years, but I feel I've finally arrived. Very structured department, focussed, busy, hard working compared to many departments. Me and Sue have worked in so many departments and this has been the best one I've worked in. Also the variety of the job is really enjoyable ...Finally - Danielle. I never expected to have such a good working relationship with her. It has been brilliant!

Lows... so much work to do. It's all about getting use to managing the workload. I don't get that much contact with the rest of the team. I often don't know what the team in the other [main] office is doing.

Barry made a suggestion:



Go to the SMBs more? I think we have a good relationship with SMBs that might be a good place to sort that out. Once you get a good reputation you know who to go to get a good speech or a bit of press coverage. So its building relationships. You can come into the main office more to see what is going on.

Jen was the last to go:

Highs then: the job's interesting and challenging; I like seeing things developing; working with the team, people from other departments and other agencies. My lows are: reception diverting calls which are irrelevant for me because I speak Welsh, e.g. swimming opening times. It then takes me ages to find this out which is a bad use of my time.

Sue:

I got to say as well, I'm not having a go at Regeneration, but they always have their answer phones on so we have to take their calls.

Barry:

How common are these problems?

Jen:

Fairly regularly. I also dislike other people coming along asking me things that they haven't looked at properly.

Barry:

Yes, we'll always have the 'usual suspects' who cause problems.

Barry summarised:

I think this has been useful. We need to set priorities for what we think has come out of today and act on it. How about we start having a thirty minute, more informal meeting, where we can throw things around like this? Things that went well in the week and things that didn't, so we can move forward from things.

Rhi:

That would certainly improve internal communications in the team.

Danielle:

How about we have lunch as a team once a month as well? We hardly do anything like that?

Barry didn't sound too keen on this, but preferred something in work hours.

Rhi:

How about having a Highs and Lows meeting on Friday then? By then you feel like a brain dump.

Barry:

Shall we try it and see how it goes then?

They all agreed.

At the time, this seemed like a good idea to me. However, wasn't this one of the purposes of the regular team meeting that was so often cancelled? We will consider this shortly.

The next session was the SWOT analysis. I facilitated this session, which meant I sat at the PC and updated the SWOT table (which was projected onto the screen) as

people shouted out ideas. Most of the content in the table has been added in previous team meetings, as a team SWOT analysis was part of the Quarterly Business Reviews for each department. The lines in bold italics were the points that the team thought were the most important. The purpose and application of the SWOT was somewhat unclear but it seemed to be a tool to allow the whole team to think about how they were doing and what they needed to look out for. Confusingly, 'Teamwork' was identified as both a strength and an opportunity; while sharing knowledge within the team and team communication were both seen as weaknesses. It was therefore unclear in what sense teamwork was seen as a strength. Two of the weaknesses – 'too lenient on extending deadlines' and 'lack of protocol/procedure' were managerial responsibilities for organising and regulating. The latter was a weakness identified by Rhi to suggest that the way the team manages resources and plans projects should be very structured (and bureaucratic), as this was something she claimed to have learnt in her previous employment in the private sector (any 'private sector' ideas seemed to be given primacy over anything 'public sector'). Barry said he was not too sure what 'protocol' meant and he did not seem too bothered about this point. Rhi said, "Maybe standard operating procedures would have been a better phrase". He said, "I was going through this SWOT at the last QBR and didn't know what that line referred to, so I just skipped over it."

Table 5 Improvement Planning SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p><i>Knowledge</i></p> <p><i>Expertise</i></p> <p><i>Work well/partnership working</i></p> <p>Positive attitude to challenge</p> <p><i>Team work</i></p>	<p><i>Sharing knowledge within the team</i></p> <p><i>Lack of protocol/procedure/formal process</i></p> <p>Lack of communication</p> <p>Need business continuity</p> <p><i>Too lenient possibly extending deadlines for information too far</i></p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>Positive impact on Council</p> <p><i>Team working</i></p> <p><i>In a position of influence internally</i></p> <p>Raise our profile and understanding</p> <p><i>Tightening up of processes : of deadlines, responses and comment on recommendations</i></p> <p>Impact on each others workloads</p>	<p><i>Reliance on others/Services which can impact upon Improvement Planning meeting deadlines</i></p> <p><i>Change in Government/Policy</i></p> <p><i>Regulation</i></p> <p>Conflicting information given because not kept up-to-date</p>

The final session before lunch was ‘Mission impossible’. This session, similar to the team roles and training needs, was rather unremarkable. Team members had prepared a statement beforehand and they went around and read them out. Most of the statements were rather bland, such as “Help the team achieve its goals and constantly improve” (Danielle) whereas Brenda said something about a jigsaw puzzle. Jen’s “putting the ‘me’ in improvement” got a cheer as they went round the group. After everyone had spoken, Rhi suggested that they pool together their statements and try to come up with a team mission statement. However, Barry argued “Oh, I don’t think we need to do that now, we can do that next time. Let’s get stuck into lunch!” With this the team put away their papers and walked over to the buffet. They were each handed a feedback form by Barry. The form had questions asking the team members to rate the day overall and each session individually. I had a brief chance to look at the responses and everyone had put either a 5/5 or 4/5 next to every statement (all the statements were positively framed and 5 was always ‘strongly agree’). There were not many extra comments apart from things like “Nice to get away from the office for a

change”. The team then ate lunch from the buffet and had a chat. The ‘team day’ ended at 13:00 and then everyone travelled back to the office to work for the afternoon.

In the afternoon I asked Ryan and Sue what they thought about the development sessions.

Ryan:

I enjoyed it. It’s nice to get out of the office sometimes. I think I would like to have done something a bit more fun like kayaking, bowling or something to take your mind off work.

Sue:

I thought Brenda’s bit was good. Her highs and lows were very encouraging. I thought it was gonna be a bit too formal and boring but it was quite fun. It took a while to get moving but it was pretty good in the end.

Ryan said the Friday team briefing idea “sounded good”. He said that he used to have things like team development in his old department [Corporate Services and reprographics]. “Melville used to give me loads of development and training”. I’ve been in this service for two years and today was the first time we have had one of those team days.

Barry said that he thought the team day was good. He said the team “didn’t start from a low base”. In other words, they are already very capable people and can work well together. Barry wants an open environment. He said that most of the highs and lows of people on the training day did not surprise him. He didn’t display any urgency that the lows should be remedied or resolved. He talked about recruiting people and how he thinks he has a good team. He said he takes full responsibility for the quality of his staff.

### *Team Weekly Highs and Lows*

The following Friday after the team development day, they held their first ‘Highs and Lows’ session. Jen was again responsible for organising it and she brought in some cookies for the occasion. Barry came in and asked, “So what are we doing then?” Jen said they needed to get everyone together so Barry went off to the communications office to “rally the troops”.

Everyone sat around the room, those based in the main office stayed at their desks, the others sat wherever they could find a chair. Barry started:

Highs and lows this week then. Well, Gerard's goal was a high [the girls booo] and I also have a new Tele! On a serious note, meeting with John about direction for community strategy – having access to people. Lows: councillor coming in saying things that are out of order and unnecessary.

Danielle and Brenda said their high was squashing a negative story about the council trading standards department that could have been in the local and regional press. A good relationship with a local journalist was needed to sort it out. On the low side, Danielle protested, "Our job is a thankless job". Barry replied, "Well something that came out last week – don't be stuck out on your own you two, come and tell us and share it and we can help each other."

Danielle: It's hard not to take it personally - it's my work at the end of the day"

Barry: It's a two-way thing. Even leaders are people. They have to respect you.

Danielle: I think I lack assertiveness. It might be something to do with my age [she is in her early twenties]. I respect authority too much and I find it hard to stand up to them.

Barry: The most important thing to remember is to not take it home with you. It's difficult not to let it get you down.

Jen's highs were getting a lot of work done that she didn't expect. Barry said well done and mentioned in passing that he sometimes has a problem with time management and he is trying to improve it.

Jen replied:

Surely you must have learned some time management skills at insight, Barry?

Barry: Yes I did, but I often get work that I don't expect in my planner software.

Ryan's turn was next: I've got no lows really. High is we are close to deadline on Monday for PI [performance indicator] return.

Generally, people didn't have too much to say for the discussion. The girls ended the session talking about how Big Brother was a high, which brought a groan from Barry: "I'm glad I missed that!" However, Barry tried to appear upbeat about the usefulness of the weekly session.

I think we will book this in for thirty minutes each week then. I don't mind what we talk about - football, TV, etcetera as long as it helps the team process. I think we'll work on the team hugs and stroking... but you know!

It was unclear what Barry inferred by the 'team process'. My observations demonstrated ample evidence that the team were very capable of chatting about TV or anything else with each other. The difference in the 'highs and lows' session was that the conversation became more formal with the whole team sitting around and with Barry chairing the meeting.

Later that morning I asked Sue what she thought of the highs and lows session. She said,

Oh it was alright. I can see what he's trying to do – share the success and communicate more, especially for the coms. girls. But I'm not really into that sort of thing, you know. I think it will fade off in a few weeks time. There wasn't that much to say, we are such a small team. I don't think we need one every week that's for sure.

Jen on the same question reflected:

It was alright. Nice to get a chance for the team to come together, as we are stuck in three different offices for most of the week.

The following Friday, Barry came into the office at the scheduled highs and lows time to ask about what was happening with the meeting. Sue retorted, "Do we need one every week?"

Barry looked a little hesitant, "I don't know if we'll need it every week. I will ask the girls in coms to see what they think."

"It's a load of bullshit", Sue uttered quietly as Barry was waking out.

Barry came back in about fifteen minutes later and said, "We won't have highs and lows with everyone then. We'll [pointing to Ryan] just have a chat about football now".

The following two weeks there were no highs and lows sessions again. One week there were a few team members away so they decided it was not worth it whereas the following week several team members said they were too busy. I asked Ryan about this and why he thought the highs and lows fizzled out. He said he thinks that it was just a bit inconvenient and people can't make it when they have other work or meetings to go to. I then asked Ryan if he was happy with the amount of training he got in the team. He thought about it and replied, "I'll be honest, I would like more. Some managers are better than others at giving training. Melville used to be very good, but Barry is not so hot on it."

Barry's attempt to involve the team in the 'highs and lows' hadn't met very positive responses from the team. Sue said it was "bullshit"; Jen, an acquiescent "alright"; meanwhile Ryan admitted he would like more training and he didn't find the highs and lows particularly developmental or enjoyable.

## **8.4 Team Management**

### **8.4.1 Role of service manager**

Barry has been at the council for twenty years and used to work in personnel and development for a long time. He is based in the office next door to the main improvement planning office, sharing the wall next to where Ryan sits. Although the internal walls were thin plasterboard, most of the sound is dampened between the two rooms. Barry occasionally can hear sounds in the office if there is a lot of laughter or shouting, but not much else. It is rare to hear noises coming from Barry's office, apart from when he writes on a white board he has attached on his side of the dividing wall. When this squeaking noise occurs, someone in the office says "Barry's got his thinking cap on again!" Barry said he has an open door policy and had tried to make his office more welcoming recently so that people are more comfortable coming in. He said because of the way the desk used to be arranged, people used to stand at the door and talk to him.

It was difficult to observe what Barry was doing most days as I was based in the main office, but his electronic diary, accessible through the computer network on MS Outlook, suggested he was often in meetings. His diary records from April 2006 – July 2006 suggested that he had around eight to ten meetings a week. Each meeting was pencilled to last two hours on average. May appeared to be a particularly busy month with some weeks committing to fourteen or more meetings. The appointments ranged from established meetings, such as SMB and the 'one-to-one' with the director, to occasional meetings, with other service managers and external auditors. The improvement planning team meeting was also pencilled in for every other Thursday afternoon. However, considering that the improvement planning meetings were often cancelled during the fieldwork period, it was difficult to establish how many of the other meetings actually went ahead.

Barry has an easy going relationship with his team. As noted above, he comes in for social conversations quite regularly. He likes being popular with his team and making light-hearted quips. During the fieldwork I did not see him lose his temper or discipline any of the team members. Sue informed me that he “doesn’t really get cross, he will say something like, ‘I think you should take that back’ but he doesn’t shout or anything.” For the first week or so, Barry would make regular witticisms about teamwork for my benefit. On the first day he said to the team, “Mark is interested in teamwork so keep your swearing to a minimum.” On another occasion, he came in to ask for a piece of work from Sue. When she replied that she hadn’t done it and claimed he hadn’t been clear when he needed it, Barry looked at me and remarked, “You see what I have to work with! With teambuilding we hope that everyone works together, but some team members just don’t want to listen sometimes.” He also likes to talk about sport with Ryan. The football world cup was on during the first month of the research and he often came in to discuss news, fixtures and results.

Asking workers their opinion of their manager is one of the most sensitive issues in organisational research. It is very rare for workers to be forthright about their views, particularly regarding negative aspects. More often, the researcher can expect a muted response such as ‘They are a good boss’, ‘They are alright, not perfect but they try their best’ or something analogous. This is where day-to-day participant observations provide an intriguing insight. Any guarded, brief synopses of management capability, such as those above, become insignificant when one considers the wide variety of manager-worker experiences/relations. On some occasions, team members demonstrated admiration for Barry. Sue suggested at the end of the team development day, after Barry had gone, “Oh, Barry is a lovely bloke. He comes out of himself out of work. He can come over a bit serious in his office.” Rhi and the other showed agreement and Rhi responded, “Yeah, it’s just because he’s quite quiet, but he has a really good sense of humour. He’s very down to earth”. At another time, Sue was reflecting on her opinions of Barry in comparison to other managers:

Barry is a good boss, I’ve been working here for twenty years and he’s the best boss I’ve had. He’s very laid back and he trusts you. He doesn’t over-control. The only drawback is that he is *too laid back sometimes* and let’s people get away with things. He lets deadlines be pushed back from different people and it looks bad on us then.



Opinions and experiences were not always positive. On some occasions team members showed distress at Barry's behaviour. Sue called him a "little shit" and said he was "pissing [her] off". After Barry had single out Sue for her to stay behind one evening to help him with some administration tasks, Sue responded "I think it's terrible how you make me do things for you." Later Barry came in and asked Sue to do something adding "Is this OK? Or am I being unreasonable again?" Sue replied irritated, "There's no need to be sarcastic." Sue would often say things like, "I'm fed up with Barry; he won't let me have a minutes peace." Whereas Ryan admitted, "Barry can be disorganised and gives you work last minute, often when you're about to go on holiday!"

Barry mentions encouraging his staff to "take a risk" from time to time. However, he did not practice what he preached here. As an example, he cancelled a CIP champions meeting that Sue was responsible for, plainly undermining her. Sue was in Barry's office for a while talking about CIP and when she returned about ten minutes later, she said Barry has cancelled the champion's meeting because he thinks we are not ready. Barry followed her in to make sure we were not talking about him. Sue said that Barry thought they needed clear terms of reference for champions meeting before they can hold it.

Later Rhi came back into the office from a meeting and asked Sue what was wrong. Sue said "I'm stressed out about CIP and what Barry is saying about it. I know what Barry is saying about terms of reference but we could have had the meeting to get things moving, otherwise we are gonna get nowhere."

Rhi started giving Sue advice and coaching her about this:

Why does Barry need to be there?

Sue: Well he wanted to be seen to be involved with it because of Jill [director of corporate centre]

Rhi: I don't think you should have cancelled it. [she is undermining Barry here, they seem to do this.]

Sue: Well its too late now, I've cancelled it. I wanted to get some progress with it so we could take it to QBR and say what we are doing on it and how we are going to take it forward.

Rhi: They need to be taking control of it, they need to champion it, so we need to get them on board.

This predicament again saw Barry undermining his team members, Rhi not having much influence either way and Sue feeling powerless to change anything.

#### **8.4.2 Team leader**

Rhi has been at the council for over a year but was moved into Improvement Planning as team leader only ten weeks before the fieldwork commenced. Previously she was based in the regeneration department working on communications work. Before joining Dyffryn CBC she worked in the private sector in various media relations roles, focussing on internet content editing and local press public relations. As mentioned previously, the main team office was reorganised when Rhi joined the team so that she had a desk that was facing the other team members. It appeared that this was an attempt to signal her leadership status and enable team supervision.

In style, Rhi was relatively formal and self-assured. She was quick to offer advice and demonstrate her knowledge and experience. While she had been in the team only a short while, it was clear that she desired the status and respect of leader. In an interview about her new role, she said “it is difficult for the team to get used to the change but I have got to introduce new ground rules and procedures.” One such procedure was the work planning meeting which was a new initiative; another was a file for each team member which detailed the work they had in progress so that other team members could become acquainted with their work if they were away from the office. She also felt that she needed to know about Barry’s work so she could take over if he “broke his leg” (an oft-used scenario among the team). She also said that she is slowly learning the skills and character of each member of the team so she can delegate tasks accordingly. As such, she is keen to pass more of the communications work onto the team members other than the Com girls because they have so much work in this area. She offered the following observations:

Some authorities have twice or three times as many communications staff as we do. We are so busy with press enquiries we don’t get time to develop things like consultation. I have done so much on my own people are amazed what I have achieved with so little.

As these words show, Rhi is not afraid to sing per own praises and likes to be centre of attention. She has a close working relationship with the head of IT, Boris. She frequently says “[Boris] loves me!” She will often make peculiar self-publicising

statements like “I am a professional birthday card buyer because I know the world and I buy for the world.” Rhi regularly informs the team what she is working on and how busy she is. She will also inform the team when she leaves the office to go for a meeting so they can inform anyone looking for her. “I would love to have a day without any meetings”, she often declares. Often her meetings are with the IT department, as Rhi works closely with them on Internet and Intranet content and development. Boris is of a similar age and experience to Rhi and the two often support each other and work through problems together before meetings.

Rhi is not afraid to speak her mind and criticise other employees – particularly managers of other teams. Early on in the fieldwork she said that she has “nothing to say about John” meaning that she strongly disliked him. She also shows her distaste for the new head of HR, Kate. “I don’t rate her at all. I can get on with anyone but I just can’t stand her.” Regarding the head of regeneration (her old manager) she said, “She is out of her depth... in terms of being a people manager she is absolutely awful.”

During the fieldwork period, the HR department were in the process of conducting a job evaluation across various levels of the organisation. This involved evaluating the responsibilities involved in different jobs and the salary commensurate with each role. The team leader level was one of the main focuses of the evaluation. Rhi was hoping to have an increase in salary as a result of her move to improvement planning team leader and this depended on the job evaluation. However, unfortunately for Rhi, her evaluation came back judging that she did not deserve a pay rise. The day this happened, Barry discretely called Rhi into his office to deliver the news. She came back into the office about twenty minutes later. She had visibly red eyes looking as though she had been crying. This was clearly a sensitive issue so I felt it appropriate not to try to ask her or Barry about it, although I did have a chance to interview the HR officer responsible for the job evaluation. Later, I also asked Barry about the team leader role and whether he needed a leader below him. He fairly defensively replied,

Yes, I wanted a team leader because I don’t like managing too many people. I think it is needed so I am not managing too many.

I would liked to have pushed him further here, but it was clear that he didn’t want to say much more, particularly as Rhi was pretty down after not being formally

recognised as a team leader by HR. My observations had often supported the HR assessment. It was unclear what she added as team leader. She did not seem to be taken very seriously by either Barry or the other team members. The team was small enough so that Barry could keep track of what the others were doing and individually manage them. One major opportunity for Rhi was the fact she was based in the office with the others, nevertheless, as we have seen, she didn't operate any form of supervision and leadership in the office, beyond periodic snippets of advice that were ignored. This was obviously a difficult time for Rhi.

Any direct questioning about the other team members' perceptions of Rhi were met with unsurprisingly muted responses like "she is getting there" (Ryan) or "she's alright" (Jen). However, when being questioned further and in general office conversation, a different impression emerged. Ryan and Sue said a number of times that they did not know what Rhi does most days. Apparently she didn't really tell them much. Sue argued,

She isn't really a team leader. She doesn't do much to help Barry out. She is quite new but it's about time she got used to being leader by now. ...Barry has got so much on his plate. I think he finds it all too much and was hoping Rhi would do some of his work.

Another day, Rhi did not come into work as she was working from home. Jen said to the others, "I can't remember her saying that – she didn't tell us". My impression of these statements, and the general feel from the team about Rhi, was that because she was called a team leader they expected more from her. They were not impressed by her attempt at displaying leadership qualities and they felt they often did not even know what she was doing. Outside work, team members were also quite offensive about her personality. One day at the pub at lunchtime, while Rhi was absent, Danielle said that Rhi is a "dizzy blonde". They agreed that she has "an annoying personality but she is good at her own job" (referring to the communications work).

## **8.5 Discussion of team environment and management**

### **8.5.1 Getting work done**

The team workplace for much of the observations was close-knit with strong working relationships. Team members were very sociable and most evidence pointed towards a supportive working environment. However, as noted earlier, this led to difficulties in

the task environment. When deadlines approached for individual team members it was common for them to panic and withdraw from the routine team activities. They became less sociable within the group and frequently requested to work from home. The open plan office environment, which purportedly encouraged a strong team ethos, was here experienced in a very different way. The noise of the group was distracting and frustrating for individuals when they wanted to concentrate. This led to comments such as 'I get twice as much done at home where it is quiet' or 'I can get done in three hours [at home] what I do in eight here.' The team was not a good place to be when team members really needed to work. Therefore, on many occasions the team social environment did not complement the task environment. In contrast, the 'com girls' worked as a pair in a separate office and very rarely found the need to work from home. Their task environment was based on short quick tasks that required strong interdependence. Deadlines were much tighter in this part of the team and the pair frequently reported how they felt stressed and overworked. They also worried that they were not based in the main team office and did not know what was 'going on' as much as the others. The analysis therefore reveals that both task and social environment have strong influences on team member experiences. But perhaps the most important concern is the match between the two environments. While employees are often more inclined to report their negative experiences, the routine moans and bores, the source of these concerns frequently comes from the perception of dissonance between the two environments. While dissatisfaction with workload and deadlines will come as no surprise, the perceived dissonance from the social environment was unexpected. It was either too strong (i.e. too noisy) or too weak (i.e. isolated from the action and not knowing what is going on). The optimum in the team literature is the socio-technical ideal – 'joint optimisation' (Emery, 1976). But as the Tavistock studies discovered, the balance between these two systems is extremely difficult to measure let alone realise. We will consider the technical system a little further shortly.

### **8.5.2 Teams roles and interdependence**

The close team environment led to social conformity and low conflict among team members. The repetition and close proximity of office activities led to strong norms such as tea breaks, phone calls and informal roles that were tacitly accepted by every team member and manager. The social norms created an internal pressure of

conformity. The team develops clear standpoints on organisational issues and every team member is expected to keep 'on message'. When individual team members speak against the team consensus they are urged to change their views and reminded that 'it's the way things are done around here'. The team manager used the label 'toxic element' to refer to team members who did not respect the team norms. If they remained antagonistic over time they would be chastised and encouraged to leave the team. This side of team life has similarities with the observations of Sinclair (1992) who points out teams often exert internal pressure and monitoring for conformity rather than allow individual empowerment and autonomy. It also is characteristic of Barker's (1993) 'concertive control', whereby team processes are mediated by strong peer pressure.

The nature of communication within the team was open and fluid. Individual team members felt a responsibility to report back to the group any interesting or controversial news. They select and adapt the information to the interests of the group and conduct 'boundary management' by specifically focussing on news which may adversely affect the team (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992). The process tends to be highly informal and ad hoc. This team behaviour contributes to the in-group/out-group mindset of internal protection and external aggression. When team members reflect on internal performance they use euphemistic language such as 'we are getting there slowly' but with reference to external departmental performance they will overtly condemn as 'terrible' or 'awful'. This analysis identifies a consistent weakness in an organisational-wide team approach. Boundaries between teams are important in socio-technical systems designs because they provide demarcations that facilitate communication between individuals; quicker and more effective decision making; and a task environment based on interdependence (Cherns, 1976). However, boundaries also bring inter-group competition and blame. As individual teams face performance problems and inefficiencies it is convenient to locate the blame outside of the team. Rather than blaming themselves, it is always team X's problem or the manager of team Y being difficult. The stronger the social environment within teams, the more likely and stronger the blame is of other teams. In this way, teams provide a structural defence for team members which can lead to the risk of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1972). Rather than a specific task being the responsibility on an individual it is the responsibility of the team; when everyone is responsibility no-one is responsible

(Emery, 1972). This helps individual team members to feel more secure but does not assist in the attainment of organisational goals or in creating a council-wide team ethos.

We will now consider the topic of interdependence. The literature depicts several variants of this; Thompson (1967), for instance, suggests 'pooled', 'sequential' and 'reciprocal'. In a recent study in the public sector, Procter and Currie (2004) observed that limited pooled or 'target-based' interdependence was most common in an office environment. This is where interdependence is not realised through individual tasks but in the additive contributions of team members towards a group-level goal. In this situation, team members sometimes carry out similar tasks to each other but require little intra-group interaction in the accomplishment of these tasks. According to this kind of analysis, interdependence is highly dependent on the task environment (Benders and van Hooft, 1999). In Dyffryn, there is generally a low level of sequential/reciprocal task interdependence. There are informal helping behaviours on IT or administrative issues but these were not significant in the accomplishment of tasks. There are also helping behaviours when individuals are recognised as being under stress but these are generally minor and used to minimise the distractions of an open plan office, such as answering other's phones or closing the office door. Some team members have a belief in the synergistic potential of team interdependence as they discuss 'big' team tasks such as the improvement report. Sue recalls how they can 'work like mad' and get things done very quickly when they all work together. However, the specific task cited by Sue here is a yearly task with much of the work concentrated into a few weeks. If they can 'work like mad' for a short period this is largely due to the fact work demands are not very high for much of the time. Generally, the interdependence of office teams in Dyffryn appears to be based on targets and outcomes similar to the findings of Procter and Currie (2004). Progress in team targets are monitored using the business planning software and are reported to other departments and senior management at the quarterly business reviews. However, diverging from this general finding, one area of interdependence which did appear to be novel was the application of technology to team tasks. The improvement planning team and other departments in the council occasionally used the office laptop and projector to display digital files to the group that were used to make group modifications collaboratively in real time. Using the projector every team member can

see the document and contribute to its development. This is perhaps a good example of using reciprocal interdependence in an office environment and an application of technology that may increase in the future, particularly in local Government through 'e-government' initiatives (e.g. Beecham Review, 2006). It is also an interesting extension of socio-technical systems analysis as 'technology', in its broadest sense, was generally viewed as antithetical to autonomy and interdependence in team environments. This may have been a reflection of the period of these studies and the nature of technological 'mechanisation' before the 'information age' of computers and networks which can here be seen to facilitate team interdependence.

Office task environments are typically not as tangible as manufacturing task environments and this makes interdependence a more difficult concept to assess in this context. The informality of the open plan office and the protracted nature of tasks (e.g. drafting a report within three months) makes day-to-day interdependence highly informal. Unlike in Barker (1993) and Ezzamel and Wilmot (1998) there was little 'concertive control' in relation to task behaviour. It appears this was due to the task asymmetry between team members. It was difficult for team members to monitor each other because they had varying task responsibilities and did not always have a detailed understanding of each other's work. This is one main area where teamworking in office environments differs to the linear processes of manufacturing systems (and also why quality circles are very unlikely to work in offices). Rather than specific task monitoring, team members instead use informal gossip about other team members or management, saying 'I don't know what she does all day' or 'they don't seem to do much do they?' The informality of this process did not observably feed into the task environment and affect peer pressure.

Team roles are frequently discussed as important in the team literature (e.g. Belbin, 1988). Team manager Barry often referred to 'playing to people's strengths' and identified the responsibility of team managers to identify the abilities of team members. This was evident in the informal tacit roles of team members: Ryan the 'IT expert' or Sue the 'events organiser'. However, the more formal tasks that team members were engaged in were based on long-term agreements – 'I have always done this...' or 'I was originally employed to do this'. Individual task roles tend to be delegated by the team manager with little consultation or negotiation from team



members. In the case of Sue this often led to disagreements and bargaining about how the work demands were unfair. In the case of Ryan and Jen they would complain to the rest of the team how Barry drops things on them at the last minute. Barry attempts to diffuse any team conflict with sarcasm and humour. This creates distance between 'team responsibilities' and the regular task environment of team members on one side, and 'management responsibilities' of decision making and control on the other. Barry uses humour to divert team members' attention away from the realities of the workplace. This is much in the same way as John's wider application of 'Team Dyffryn' was a diversion away from the realities of change within the organisation.

There was a considerable degree of disparity in the workloads of team members due to different functional roles and accepted responsibilities. The difference between tasks within the improvement planning office, such as event organisation, public relations, performance indicator management and equality standards was sizable. Following Kelly (1978), there was little evidence of 'equalisation of workloads' that some socio-technical systems theorists advocated. There was little job rotation or enlargement because team members viewed themselves as being skilled or experienced in specific areas and little incentive or opportunity was provided to expand their abilities. Frontline staff were offered little or no training and this allowed the management levels, who had received the MD<sup>2</sup> training, to legitimise their working methods. The project management software and new process did not effectively break established routines for working and employees tended to rely on work methods and routines that they had developed through years of specific workplace experience or methods they have picked up in previous employment. Rhiannon provided some of the clearest examples of this – 'In my previous job I learnt to do it like this.' Thus, contrary to many team studies, flexibility was not a strong feature of the Team Dyffryn approach. This was due to the relative complexity and long completion period of office tasks.

### **8.5.3 Team management**

Team management and leadership is a central issue in the teamworking debate. The two main team traditions, Japanese and Socio-technical systems, have opposing stances on the role of team management. Japanese teams are characterised as having strong direct supervisors who contribute to team activities and make most of the

decisions over small teams. STS, in contrast, favours group autonomy or 'self-management' and discourages direct supervision. The 'issue of autonomy' repeatedly resurfaces throughout the teamworking literature (Benders and van Hootegeem, 1999). The main concerns are: who makes decisions in teams? How do they make decisions? What kind of decisions do they make? Some authors see 'autonomy' as a distraction from more important concerns. For example, Sinclair (1992) argues that the discourse of participation and empowerment in teams encourages employees to overlook more fundamental concerns of leadership. Similarly, Bower and Weinberg (1988) suggest that autonomy is not a good replacement for visionary leadership. We will consider these issues shortly. The Improvement Planning department has two team management positions – Barry as the main team manager, who has a separate office to the main team, and Rhi as team leader, who works within the main office with the other team members. This team structure is repeated across Dyffryn CBC.

#### **8.5.3.1 Main Team Manager**

The main team manager has a varied role in coordinating and controlling the activities of the department. Barry in improvement planning describes his role as providing strategic direction for the department, linking with the activities of other departments and delegating work to his team members accordingly. The insights gained through research observations over a period of time are enlightening of team authority relationships. Short reflections and retrospective sense making common in research interviews are less useful for revealing the nuances and fluctuations of office life. When team members were asked in interviews about their impression of Barry as a team manager they would reticently paint a polite picture of a friendly, laidback and competent manager. However, when observing the team in various workplace situations over time a different picture of political battles and gossiping was revealed. The team members frequently tell each other how terrible Barry is at his job – how he is unorganised, doesn't keep up with team deadlines, how he drops things on them and how he overrules their decisions. The disparity of impression between interview and observations seems to be a combination of team social pressures and incongruous experiences. Team pressures can be described to come generally from 'groupthink' and 'concertive control' which operate to protect the reputation of the team and therefore lead team members to provide a positive reflection of colleagues. The incongruous or contradictory experiences come from the ambiguity of the workplace.

Workers are constantly trying to make sense of their experiences within the office workplace and team relationships. The fluctuation in perception and emotion as various demands are placed on individuals in the office results in a wide range of views over time. This demonstrates the strength of ethnography over using an interview-only methodology. Detailed observations provide a richness that is lost through interviews.

Barry likes to have a hands-off approach to his team and frequently declares that he trusts his team to work hard without direct supervision. He also uses the saying 'take a risk' to suggest that his team are given the freedom to make decisions. These observations suggest that Barry follows something close to the STS team tradition of autonomy. Furthermore, the notion of 'choice' espoused by Trist (e.g. 1963; 1981) carries throughout Barry's approach. An influence for Barry's philosophy was the recent Dyffryn training programme, MD<sup>2</sup>, which he mentions regularly and which seemed to carry an 'empowerment' message throughout the course materials. When Barry reflected about good management practice during research interviews he used these notions suggesting that he viewed them as the cutting-edge management principles. The discourse that Barry used contradicted with his managerial behaviour and control tactics. When team members tried to make decisions in meetings he would often overrule or ignore them. He demonstrated a lack of trust in the decisions that they made and clearly contravened his 'take a risk' principle. Thus, in important areas Barry liked to retain complete control. A main reason for this was his accountability to the director of Corporate Centre and direct contact with her through one-to-one meetings. This was an aspect of Dyffryn's new mentoring approach whereby management, as well as frontline staff, were allocated more senior mentors. Because he was responsible for the performance of the team and his management skills were scrutinised by the director he felt that he must take control when office activities did not follow his management interpretation or philosophy. Thus, the central hierarchical structure of the organisation made team autonomy a limited possibility at each organisational level. The team was allowed to 'take a risk' and make decisions so long as management agreed with the decisions. Benders' (2005) argument that 'Self management' across a number of people is impossible is relevant here. There is always an imbalance of power and always the 'problem of control' (Storey, 1985). In the office environment there were so many areas of potential task-

based disagreement – from the wording of documents, to the timing and progress of meetings, to allocation of training budgets. When office disagreements arise, the hierarchy and formal management authority always takes primacy over team processes. This was extremely de-motivating for team members in Dyffryn.

### **8.5.3.2 Team Leader**

The presence of the team leader position was an interesting finding within Team Dyffryn. Formal team leaders are most associated with Japanese teams where they play a part in the team and make most of the task-based team decisions (Delbridge et al., 2000). In Dyffryn the team leader position was ambiguous and difficult for the incumbent to fulfil. In improvement planning, Rhi was largely an operational member of staff with specific task responsibilities. She worked in the main office with the other team members. According to the formal structure, the role shared similarities with the Japanese team leader. However, the major difference was that Rhi had little influence over team activities. It appeared that the team manager had little respect for her and did not treat her as a serious managerial colleague. The team members were also not particularly complementary of the role. They were jealous that she had certain perks of a manager (e.g. attending the management training course and particular management meetings). They also felt she was out of the office a lot and they did not know what she did all day. Sue remarked that she didn't help Barry out much with management responsibilities and was not a 'real' team leader. Yet observations revealed that she was given little chance to do this. Furthermore, her promotion to team leader was not formally recognised by HR during job evaluation and she was not awarded a pay rise.

The role of team leader seemed to be in 'no man's land'. The role did not provide the decision making advantages of management nor the group protection and social rewards of being a general team member. It was a position that offered limited functional purpose in the office environment. Any potential for supervision that is possible from such a role in a manufacturing environment was non-existent again due to the intangible and protracted nature of office tasks. As Dohse et al. (1985) noted, Japanese teams are more routinised than STS teams. In many ways the office is not as routinised as the factory. A problem for Rhi that would be difficult to change was the established perception of her role. Team members had set interpretations of the 'real'

role of a team leader and then assessed how she measured up against this standard. The context made it unlikely that she would be able to improve in this regard.

#### **8.5.4 Team decision making through meetings**

Team meetings are used in a range of ways at Dyffryn. First, there are office team meetings that are scheduled regularly to discuss operational concerns, make team decisions and coordinate work. Second, there are occasional team development meetings and away days within individual teams with a more improvement focus. Although meetings are considered an important process of team interaction in the literature, qualitative case studies are generally critical of meetings because of their bureaucratic and inflexible nature. For example, Sinclair (1992: 617) writes 'the requirement for individuals to work in meetings means that, quite simply, organizations are not getting the best performance from many of their members.'

##### **8.5.4.1 Office Meetings**

The regular team meeting within improvement planning was frequently postponed because team members suggested there was no specific agenda. The team managers did little to encourage the running of the team meeting and often cancelled the meeting due to there being 'nothing to talk about'. A main problem experienced among team members was synchronising their work so they all felt free to attend the meetings. There would always be one or two people saying they had to finish something off when other people were free. This kind of excuse became more and more accepted as team meetings were cancelled. As the scheduled times of meeting were not adhered to, the team found it easier to put off more meetings. This reflected the general disinterest and dislike of meetings. The general impression was that team members found them boring and unproductive.

When meetings did go ahead within the department, the agenda and discussion process was usually strongly led and controlled by the manager. Contributions by the team were limited and the manager would generally dismiss individual team member ideas or concerns as insignificant or a symptom of particular team member personalities or lack of experience. This led to a significant level of dissatisfaction and was likely to be a determinant of the dislike of meetings. This analysis has similarities

with the findings of Rathkey (1984) and Blotnick (1984) who suggested that middle and lower level management often resist team involvement in decision making processes. Team meetings generally reflected more of a 'team briefing' scenario rather than anything more participative (Marchington and Wilkinson, 2005). Carrying implications for the relationships among departments and external regulation, one of the main aims of meetings was recognised as 'covering are backs'. This was a reflection of the scrutiny and distrust of external managers but also of the wider local government scrutiny of auditors and inspectors. It also provided evidence of an extant blame culture and the strength of the in-group/out-group relations. Moreover, it again operated against the organisation-wide Team Dyffryn philosophy.

The work planning meeting, led by the team leader, seemed to work better as a participative discussion without the main manager present. People were more willing to air their concerns and feel more relaxed without Barry's direction and scrutiny. This was one area where the team leader managed to establish some tangible leadership responsibility. However, the productivity of the meetings was still limited. While there was more fluidity in conversation and debate, the meeting process tended to only identify operational problems and not solutions. Instead of making decisions, the identified problems usually led to more meetings being organised to look at the problem in more detail. But these meetings often led to more meeting, which led to more meetings, etc. without ever solving the problems. This is a weakness of the ostensibly democratic and collaborative nature of meetings and was a common feature of many of the meetings observed across the council. It is the kind of 'bureau-pathology' that concepts of teamworking attempt to work against. However, as Sinclair (1992) suggests, ineffective meetings are an unfortunate consequence of a team ideology based around employee participation. Instead of 'de-bureaucratization', teamworking can unwittingly reform and elaborate traditional systems (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998). In the end, team decisions were frequently made by the managers either at the end of the meetings or in-between scheduled meetings without direct group input. The traditional hierarchy was therefore the basic relay and teamworking did not remove this but merely added further bureaucratic processes and practices.

#### **8.5.4.2 Team Development**

Whereas several team members stated that they wished they had more training and were keen to be accepted of the next stage of the management training programme, they demonstrated a surprising lack of enthusiasm for the team development day and other informal training opportunities. Several team members commented how they had wished they were doing something more 'fun' or activity based. The development day was viewed as an extension of the mundane and boring team meetings in the office. They were also worried that the day would not be very helpful and that it would never lead to improvements in their experience. A major problem with the day was that the team members worked on several of the tasks alone beforehand and so when it came to conducting the task on the day they simply rehearsed their prepared work. This meant there was little team interaction and discussion on many of the activities. Team members appeared to do this because they were worried about being 'put on the spot' on the day. They lacked the openness to learning and change recommended by both STS and Japanese perspectives.

Team members commented during the team development 'highs and lows' that they enjoyed working within the sociable team and had good fun with fellow team members. They also felt that they 'looked out for each other'. Their main concerns relating to work life were about other teams and how they gave unfair demands, inadequate information and uncooperative relations. Some of the younger members of the team were also concerned about career progression. After the initial enthusiasm of the highs and lows session in the office, it quickly fizzled out like the other team meetings. Team members quickly realised that nothing significant would change as a result of the process and people generally saw it as a waste of time. This was a microcosm of the wider council change programme and reflects what Walton (1982) called 'reality setting in'. Although individual teams had high intentions about improving the work situation, they had little control or influence over events in other teams, departments or outside of the organisation. This also reflects the general findings of the socio-technical studies of the sixties and seventies.

In sum, the increased number of meetings resulting from Team Dyffryn did not lead to an improved work experience for team members nor effective team decision making. Instead, meetings were a source of dissatisfaction, stress and boredom.

## CHAPTER 9

## Human Resource Management

### 9.1 Introduction

This chapter will consider the extent to which the human resource department plays an active role in 'Team Dyffryn'. In particular, the extent to which HR practices impact on worker attitudes and behaviours. It will be interesting to explore the extent to which workers experience personal benefits from HRM and assess the way it reinforces or detracts from the team ethos. We will review the recent changes in HRM within the organisation, the formal HR policies, and the employee perceptions of HR practices. The main practices of recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisals and job evaluation will be considered.

### 9.2 Dyffryn HR context

#### 9.2.1 Department structure

The Human Resource and Development (HRD) department has eighteen staff. The department is managed by a head of service who reports to the director of Corporate Centre. Below the head of service there are four senior HR advisors who are responsible for managing and coordinating specific projects, such as training programmes, performance appraisals, and job evaluation. Each of the senior advisors, and a group of lower level HR advisors, are responsible for providing 'generalist' HR support and advice to individual services across the council. This advice includes issues like disciplinary, redundancy, long-term sickness and employee welfare, workforce planning and the impact of new employment legislation. This advice is usually delivered through formal management meetings within each service (roughly every two weeks) and through ad hoc meetings with individual managers when specific issues arise. In the words of one senior HR advisor, "whenever they are in trouble or just need someone to chew the ear off". Apart from the managerial and advisory roles, there is a final group with more limited operational responsibilities, such as the induction officer, training officers, and administrative staff who assist in the management of systems like the sickness and absence database and recruitment advertisements.



The department has, like most of the council, undergone considerable change over the last three years. There has been a change in head of the service twice since the new chief executive arrived. The first head, Norman, was put in place a few months into the chief executive's tenure, during the organisational restructure. Towards the end of 2004, Norman introduced a new HR strategy with plans to radically change the function of the department from a rather limited 'personnel' function into a more progressive 'strategic human resource and development' process. The name of the department had actually become 'Human resources' in an earlier restructure in 2000 under the old chief executive. This earlier change had seen the Personnel department, which previously oversaw all HR related activities (albeit in a narrow sense) and a series of local government requirements to do with improvements and performance management, being split into two departments – one renamed 'Human Resources' and the other 'Organisational Improvement' (now Improvement Planning). The current head of Improvement Planning, Barry, used to work as a personnel officer within the old department. After this restructure, the HR department was extended in size to provide more HR advisory capacity. In 2004 after the 'transformational' restructure, the HR department planned for further expansion to develop new roles in training and other more proactive areas.

The second change in head of HR occurred five weeks before the commencement of the research. The previous head had, according to a few people, left to go for a better opportunity in a nearby council. It was apparently a similar role but more money and better chances for career progression. The director of Corporate Centre was running the HR department for about six months before the new head was found. During the period of research, about half of the HR staff had been in post for five years or more and half had been recruited during one of the two recent restructures. Three employees had been in post for less than a year and the department was still looking to fill a few posts.

### **9.2.2 Past Performance**

Before the new chief executive arrived, the HR department, like much of the organisation, was seen to be unorganised and performing poorly. The audit inspection

initial findings (2003) had noted that training and development planning was ‘a missing building block’ for improvement. They went on to say:

A draft human resources strategy was tabled at Corporate Management Team [*sic*] during our inspection, but the resource implications of its implementation have yet to be considered. There is a risk that it will become another unfulfilled strategy because it has not been thought through carefully enough.

Elsewhere in the inspection report, they said that the council had lots of plans in areas of HR but these were not seen as ‘real’ documents that were used and implemented as part of the day to day working of the council. Instead they were documents written to fulfil statutory requirement and there were no real intentions, or knowledge required, to implement the plans. Since the creation of the HR department in 2000, the service had carried out the bare minimum of functions. There was no centralised training budget (this was something for individual service managers to provide depending on their own inclinations and resources). There were no performance appraisals in most departments and no formal policy in this area. All together, the HR functions included posting job adverts when they were needed, recording sickness and absence figures and providing advice to departments about employment law and statutory requirement such as health and safety. There was little on the development side of HRM, the so-called ‘high performance’ or ‘innovative’ practices.

According to various people in the corporate centre directorate, the HR department had changed most significantly in the first year after John arrived. He had personally mentored the previous head Norman and helped him introduce many of the ‘private sector practices’ in the form of HR policies/practices. One senior HR advisor said, “Norman and John had a very good relationship and they worked closely together.” The first signs of change were the expansion of the department and the 2005-2008 HR strategy document, which linked nicely with the transformational strategy. It was written in a similar style and contained the same exhortations for ‘the team’ and ‘high performance’. We will now briefly discuss this report.

### **9.2.3 The new HR strategy**

The *Human Resources Strategy 2005-2008* was produced towards the end of 2004 shortly before the final inspection report. The document was seen as a medium term

strategy supporting the transformational strategy in the short term and feeding into longer term aims of becoming an 'excellent organisation'.

The aims of the strategy were outlined as improving: 1) motivation and performance; 2) career growth and satisfaction; 3) participation and team spirit; 4) good employment practices; 5) commitment and equal opportunity. In addition to this list of intended outcomes and HR policies/practices, the foreword added a key cultural component:

We anticipate that a significant outcome of the strategy over a three-year period will be a change of culture within the organisation. Together, we will create a bedrock of personal and organisational development respecting the well being and interests of our human resource. Aware of the anxieties brought about by any change agenda, we respect the need to support our employees through these exciting cultural developments, and we are well placed to nurture, mentor and coach our employees and managers for an enriched work experience. ...We want to become an organisation which values teamwork, leadership, valuing and taking personal accountability and responsibility. These are the prevailing cultural themes within the council based around which improved performance will be delivered.

The cultural priorities suggested here are respect, well-being, support (i.e. nurturing, mentoring, coaching), teamwork, leadership and personal accountability. This is a long list and assessing whether an organisational culture does, or does not, have such attributes is a difficult research challenge. How should each feature be defined? How are they to be measured? Rather than moving down this slippery path, we will more modestly consider the extent to which the new HR policies and practices impacted on the behaviours and attitudes of staff and how they understood any cultural and practical changes as a result of HRM.

The 'mission statement' in the HR strategy report provided a rather convoluted and superfluous description of what the HR department wanted to achieve:

Provide a high quality value-added service, which will assist the Council to achieve and maintain a flexible, excellent, relevant, satisfied and "representative" workforce by which to meet, sustain and exceed its operational objectives. It will consist of a customer-focused group of knowledgeable professionals, working in an open system of self-directed, cross-functional teams to provide ethical, holistic, and flexible workforce solutions to divisions in order to ensure value for money is provided to our customers and colleagues.

Such a statement should be seen as an attempt to cast a positive image of the department. To provide a description which, if not clear, and certainly not inspiring, is an attempt to provide a description of a high aiming department? On the contrary, however, the impression is a department which is trying too hard to be all things to all people. It is the Swiss Army Knife of departments – trying to do many things, but not convincingly achieving any of them. When discussing the general features of the department with HR staff, they admitted that in reality the service was a “fairly typical HR department really” (Gary, Senior HR office). A later section in the HR strategy, labelled the ‘visionary action plan’, provided a more grounded and realistic aim: “To deploy finite HR resources in the most appropriate way in order to drive forward the Council’s priorities.” While exaggerated claims are to be expected in policy reports, the immediate contrast between the overeager rhetoric of reports and the more reserved description of reality tends to lead to a distrust of written documents. If after reading that the department is an “open system of self-directed, cross-functional teams to provide ethical, holistic, and flexible workforce solutions [etc.]” staff then provide a more prosaic description of a “fairly typical HR function really”, one is more inclined to believe the latter.

It is likely that John (Chief Executive) had some input into the HR strategy. One HR advisor reported, “Kate’s predecessor, Norman, had a really good relationship with John, who helped him a lot, so it’s difficult to tell where many of these initiatives came from.” (Mike, HR advisor) The HR strategy report was written in a similar style to the transformational plan, which was sole authored by John. Indeed, John had said that he worked very closely with each of the service heads when the changes were first introduced to make sure everything was on track.

From a HR perspective, one senior HR advisor, Gary, gave an interesting summary of the council changes in recent years:

In all fairness, when John came in he was tasked with overturning a failing authority. We were in dire straights back then. There were systems that John brought in and an ethos that needed direct support from the head of HR. In all fairness, Norman [head of HR] was a forward thinker and supported these changes that HR could help to do. The old culture was the sort that I always associated with Local Government: you turn up at nine do your bit and go home at five. No real commitment. It’s not like the private sector where your awards could be boosted significantly if you have achieved your targets. There

are no real incentives in local Government. The old culture is now slowly changing. ... Norman, working with John, has weaned out a lot of the old school individuals. We have been able to see the back on them and in a lot of cases it was good riddance! For those people who had that mind set, that culture that said 'why should I do anything for the organisation?' It's almost impossible to turn people like that around when they have been like that for thirty years. The rest of the people have been turned around to the new way of thinking or are in the process of being turned around. Now when new people are coming in the organisation we are hitting them with this performance culture that we are trying to achieve. We are trying to build a local authority that isn't made up of old fudgers who moan about their cups of tea or this, that and the other. There is more of a strategic drive to improve the services and improve Dyffryn, basically because a lot of people who work here live here. ... I think it is working to a certain degree.

Gary was confident that changes had occurred in the HR department and the organisation more generally. He highlighted how John's role was to orchestrate and oversee the organisational transformation and it was therefore natural that he would have direct input into new initiatives in HR and other departments. His description of change here placed more emphasis on what the organisation used to be like – 'no real commitment', 'old school people', 'old fudgers' – rather than what it had become; apart from the 'hitting them with this performance culture' and possibly a bit more like the private sector. All I had seen of the new HR approach at this point was exaggerated and ambiguous rhetoric in the HR strategy. It was therefore important to drill down into the practical intentions and implication of the new HR approach, if indeed there were any. A more practical programme of practices was found in an action plan attached at the end of the HR strategy report. It provided a long list of strategic aims along with the practical outcomes desired. I feel it is worth providing a copy of this action plan as a reference point for the changes.

**Table 6 Human Resource Management Action Plan**

<b>Strategic Aims</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
<b>a) Develop the strategic and operational ability of our managers</b>	Establish and implement a leadership and management development programme so that all learning is focused on improving the delivery of services to customers
	Ensure clear and consistent standards of management
	Develop a culture that promotes coaching and mentoring across the Council

<b>Table 6 (continued)</b>	
<b>b) Introduce effective organisational and workforce development</b>	<p>Ensure employees have the skills, knowledge and confidence to deliver excellent services to our customers</p> <p>Introduce a corporate induction programme to ensure all new employees understand how they contribute to delivering the Council's Vision and Strategic Aims.</p>
<b>c) Invest in effective learning, training and development programmes to ensure the Council is able to meet its customer needs.</b>	<p>Support employees in learning, training and development programmes to improve skills and capacity</p> <p>Work towards achieving IiP recognition for the whole Council</p>
<b>d) Develop a corporate competency framework</b>	<p>Ensure competencies are integrated with the performance management process</p> <p>Integrate relevant competencies into the recruitment and selection process</p>
<b>e) Recruit, promote and retain the very best talent</b>	<p>Develop a strategy for recruitment and retention that embraces the need to maximise our ability to attract talent</p> <p>Modernise the recruitment process by improving the use of available technology and progressive practices.</p> <p>Attract people with the right skills in the right place at the right time by using the most appropriate recruitment methods</p> <p>Develop and implement a corporate branding for recruitment advertising</p> <p>Provide training for manager on recruitment and selection</p>
<b>f) Phase in a corporate personal performance management system</b>	<p>Increase understanding and awareness of the organisation and its objectives</p> <p>Develop individual performance measurements</p> <p>Develop competencies to carry out designated roles</p>
<b>g) Ensure reward reflects responsibilities, accountabilities and performance</b>	<p>Implement a fair, equitable and affordable grading structure via job evaluation</p> <p>Implement an appropriate reward strategy so that the Council remains competitive in attracting and retaining the best available talent.</p>
<b>h) Modernise HR policies and practices to motivate and inspire people</b>	<p>Introduce policies, procedures, and guidance to modernise employment practices, job descriptions and contracts</p> <p>Ensure employment policies promote work-life balance within a service provision framework</p> <p>Implement on-line flexi system</p> <p>Review and update the Council's 10 most used HR policies, procedures and guidance</p>
<b>i) Reduce the cost and impact to service delivery of sickness absence</b>	<p>Establish and implement appropriate strategies to reduce absenteeism and monitor the impact absenteeism has on services</p> <p>Ensure a fair and consistent application of the Management of Sickness Absence policy</p> <p>Provide managers with the skills, knowledge and understanding to better manage sickness absence within each service area.</p>

This action plan can be summarised as covering four main areas. Rows a) – d) cover training and development; e) looks at recruitment, selection and retention; f) covers

performance appraisals; g) reward management and jobs evaluation; and h) – i) discuss background HR practices such as flexi-time and sickness policy. We will review the extent to which this action plan was implemented and the related results shortly. First, we will consider another aspect important in the recent development of Dyffryn's HR function. Two years into the HR strategy the head of HR, Norman, left the authority. He was replaced by a new head, Kate. We will therefore look into the impact of Kate's arrival next.

#### **9.2.4 New head of HR: Another new philosophy?**

While the current HR strategy had been in place for two years when Kate, the new head, arrived in May 2006, it was important to find how much she followed the strategy approach and the ethos behind it. *Prima facie*, it might be assumed that a new head of department would be selected on the basis of their support of the prevailing organisational culture and strategic priorities. However, this was not a safe assumption. On my first meeting with the head of HR she talked briefly about Dyffryn's HR strategy and what she wanted to achieve in the new role. As regard the organisational culture and the management style of the previous head of HR, she argued:

Some people don't like getting involved in a 'team culture' but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. You sometimes need people like that.

She pointed towards some posters on the wall used for a recent recruitment campaign (the posters of the workmen and the "Teamwork in progress" sign). "I think it's all a bit much!" she joked. Her cynicism towards the 'Team Dyffryn' ethos and the work of the previous head of HR was a surprise. The ease and manner in which she criticised the approach was particularly unexpected. She was certainly forthright in her views with comparison to most research participants. However, she did soften her stance slightly by saying, "You can either drag people along and hope they follow or let everyone push you along ... I know which one I prefer" (advocating the latter as preferable). Later in our conversation she clarified her HR philosophy a little further:

I see HR very much from the business case position. HR can add real financial value to the business.

This was what might be called a 'hard HR' perspective - seeing efficient use of the workforce as the main goal of HRM. This was not so surprising, given that she had

hitherto spent her career working in private industry within highly competitive sectors such as telecommunications and utilities. Her new position in Dyffryn was her first public sector role, compared to the previous head of HR who had spent his entire career in local Government.

As regards her new role and what she wanted to achieve,

There are lots of things I want to do but you can't do everything. The talk at the moment is all about 'employee engagement' but I think you can only go so far with it.

What she seemed to mean by this statement and other points about her HR style, was that HRM was really about helping the organisation run smoothly and minimising potential people-related problems. She was not against the idea of HRM all together, as she suggested when discussing how some local authorities still have a 'personnel department' – "Come on", she affirmed, "...Get with the times!" However, Ideas about 'teams', 'culture' and 'employee engagement' were seen as management gimmicks that were for people who liked that kind of thing, but carried the risk of bringing more distraction and requiring more management effort with little in the way of tangible performance improvements. Kate's position had not gone unnoticed among her HR staff,

I like the Team Dyffryn thing [...] but I don't think Kate is such a fan of it, that's just the impression I have got. (Anna, Senior HR advisor)

Now since Kate has started it is different because as far as I can see, Kate's and Norman's [old head of HR] visions are polar opposites. So maybe that shows that Norman's HR policies came from John, I don't know' (Mike, HR advisor)

['Team Dyffryn' is] a little bit cheesy for my liking. But I understand the ethos behind it, that's more important than the terminology, the ethos is that we all have a role to play whether you are the chief executive or a pool attendant in the swimming pool. There is an expectation to be involved with the things that are going on. We are trying to give people the opportunity to have those skills that they need. I like the ethos behind it. You can tell that John comes from private sector. (Gary, HR Advisor)

In summary, Kate seemed to have very different views about HR to the strategy and work of Norman/John. She was very sceptical about teamwork and instead promoted the idea of efficiency and a business case perspective through policies such as



sickness and absence. While she was committed to continuing the current HR strategy, her cynicism towards 'Team Dyffryn' was likely to slow the initiatives in this area. The manager leading on any strategy has a huge impact on which parts are prioritised and which parts are left by the wayside.

### **9.3 'Private Sector' HR practices**

We will now look at the core HR practices, all part of John's 'private sector' practices, and how they developed through the work of John, Norman and now Kate. I will spend most time on the four big practices – recruitment and selection, training, performance appraisals and job evaluation. I will then succinctly consider the impact of remaining HR policies/practices. The main aim of this section is to ask to what extent does HR feed into the transformation and the 'Team Dyffryn' approach? Can HRM provide a tangible contribution to teamworking?

#### **9.3.1 Recruitment, selection and induction**

Within the first year of the HR strategy development (2004-2005), the department became more proactive in their recruitment approach. Several HR advisors informed me that they publicised their jobs in more places, such as regional newspapers and magazines, they held career information days within the Civic Centre and they changed their style of job advertisement. In particular, they championed the chief executive's 'TEAM DYFFRYN' brand designing recruitment posters with pictures of sports shirts saying 'Join TEAM DYFFRYN and help us become champions'. Or 'Join the TEAM and become a star'. On another advert, they had a poster displaying a photograph of a group of manual workmen rebuilding a pavement with a warning sign (white triangle with red border) enlarged next to them stating, 'TEAM WORK IN PROGRESS'.

By the time I arrived in Dyffryn, this period of recruitment enthusiasm had lost its momentum and was in the past. It was seen by some HR staff as simply a sign of the times during the 'hype' of the transformation. Particularly now Kate thought that it was all 'a bit much' it was unlikely whether any further adverts like this would be used. During the fieldwork the recruitment and selection process had reverted back to a piecemeal process - each department wrote their own adverts wherever needed and

passed it on to HR who simply converted it into the established format and sent it off to an agreed list of publications. One HR advisor reflected,

I don't think we are a very proactive department in terms of recruitment and selection. We haven't got a system of succession planning, where things are monitored and arranged and put into place. It's very much if someone leaves, to get a job advert out in the local press and job centre and see who is the best person on the day based on their skills, abilities - all that kind of thing. I would like to have some system of succession planning where we are working out who is the talent of today and then plan how to get them over the next five years or so. We don't have a graduate scheme either which would be good to have. The best graduates usually tend to become recruited by the best companies where they have a dedicated graduate scheme where they know they will get training and they know what to expect from graduates because they have had them for years. We kind of expect people to come in the bottom and work their way up. So they may go elsewhere to the private sector where their skills will be recognised. There are hopes to do something but when we will have it I don't know. I don't think we could have a graduate programme in a service like business support either because it is, for want of a better word, too airy fairy. We are looking to do something in the more professional areas. At the moment services pass the job specification to us and we will put it in the press and liaise with a recruitment company, we collect the application forms, arrange the interviews, and finally the appointment, vetting checks and things. It's a traditional recruitment function I suppose. We are not as well resourced, we only have two staff working on recruitment, so it's mainly admin we do.

*Example recruitment and selection process:*

During the fieldwork in improvement planning, Jen was given the responsibility to manage the recruitment of a team member working on equalities issues. After a short meeting with Barry she wrote out the person specification as detailed below.

**Table 7 Job Person Specification**

Job title	Minority Ethnic Support Worker
Department	Corporate Centre: Improvement Planning
Location	Civic Centre

**Table 7 (Continued)**Personal attributes

- |                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Amount of experience required       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific experience working with under represented groups is highly desirable. However, positive consideration will be given to potential candidates who have the potential to develop the appropriate skills and experience necessary.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 2. Technical skills required           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellent communications – verbal and written are essential</li> <li>• Ability to communicate in plain English essential (additional language desirable)</li> <li>• Smart appearance and manner is essential</li> <li>• Must be confident, creative but be able to demonstrate attention to detail</li> <li>• Able to prioritise workload and manage own time effectively</li> <li>• Work well under pressure</li> </ul> |
| 3. Formal qualifications               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be IT literate with the ability to use a wide range of software packages including, MS Word, Excel, PowerPoint.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 4. Personality and competence required | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The successful candidate must be a highly motivated individual who can demonstrate the enthusiasm and commitment to take forward the Equalities agenda.</li> <li>• Be personable, approachable, diplomatic, tactful, enthusiastic, flexible, and reliable and have a positive attitude to the work in hand. Must be a team player.</li> </ul>                                                                            |
| 5. Special requirements                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Car driver and owner of full licence desirable.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

When I asked Jen about the new role, she said she was looking for someone who was friendly and extrovert because they would have to speak to lots of people in the community. She also said that foreign language skills would be highly desirable because they will be surveying all of the different ethnic communities in the county. There were no formal academic requirements for the post and most of the desired

attributes displayed in the person specification were personality traits such as ‘personable’ and ‘enthusiastic’. Jen had control over what was displayed here. She would also be one of the main interviewers for the short listed candidates. During my last few weeks in the improvement planning office, Jen was looking through some applications and CVs. She selected about half of the applications for interview. Her interview questions were brief open-ended questions such as ‘Why do you want this job?’ and ‘What do you think is important about working with ethnic minorities?’

This style of interviewing and selection contrasted with the method used to recruit of the communications officers in the improvement planning team (the successful candidate was Danielle, one of the ‘com girls’). In this case, Rhi had managed the person specification and interview. Instead of the emphasis being on attitudes as with the new equalities officer, the emphasis here was much more with skills. They used the following items in the interview:

#### Figure 5 Job Interview Questions

##### Scenario 1:

A reporter from a well-known national Sunday paper has made an enquiry with the Corporate Communications Office for a ‘success’ story about previous incapacity benefit claimants who have now undertaken training and secured employment with a local neighbourhood learning centre. Having secured the necessary reassurances from the reporter that their coverage will cite the ‘best practice’ element of the ‘training and back to work’ process, the people in question have agreed with you to be interviewed. However, the story features in the Sunday paper and is highly critical of the County Borough and the high number of incapacity benefits claimants and does not highlight the good work that is taking place as the reporter has assured. The interviewees are particularly upset and the fall-out of the article includes various other national publications and broadcast media wanting to follow up the story.

How would you go about mitigating this negative coverage?

How would you go about improving internal relations?

In this case, Rhi had borrowed a lot of her interviewing technique from previous work experience. In both of these recruitment situations, Barry was the only person consulted before the process. HR did not have any say regarding good practice in the

area or how to remain inline with the HR strategy. Nor were the rest of the improvement planning team consulted about what they felt a new team member should be like. There was therefore little direct consideration about how the new recruits would fit into the rest of the team.

The lack of strategic intent in recruitment and selection was part due to the resources of the HR department and part due to the past experience of difficulty attracting good candidates. Reality had set in for the more enthusiastic team advertisements. Long term, they hoped that an improved reputation for the council would lead to stronger candidates applying for jobs, but in the meantime the recruitment process was left in ad hoc and inconsistent form – left up to individual managers and teams members to control.

### **9.3.2 Induction**

The corporate induction was a new policy intended to complement recruitment. The new procedure included an induction video, supporting document for new recruits to read and a tour around the offices. There was also a departmental induction and everyone was allocated a mentor from within their directorate.

The induction video was produced about six months before the fieldwork. It is posted on the intranet and was also provided to each new member of staff on a CD ROM so that they could watch in from their desks or in their own time. The video was about twenty minutes long and was presented by one of the HR advisors. I interviewed the HR advisor responsible:

‘We have developed the corporate induction video but we need to monitor that better. We assume that everyone coming into the organisation will be inducted [it is the responsibility of each service head to do this]. We can monitor whether people watch the video because there is a quiz at the end which gets submitted so we know who has done it. That has been there for six months. Before that, once a month when we had time, we did a bulk induction, but it was a bit late because by the time they had it they could have been there for a few months. We tried to get other people on board for this. So we talked about it in SMB. But they ooo’d and aaa’d and nothing really happened with it. So now when we see people we encourage them to look at it.’ (Anna, Senior HR advisor)

The induction was broken down into nine sections and the camera switched between a close-up of the presenter and a PowerPoint slide of bullet points summarising the presentation. The video ran as follows: 1) Introduction - "Welcome and congratulations at joining Dyffryn CBC ... welcome to the team"; 2) Vision – set out the vision from the transformational plan. "We work together with our customers as one team – Team Dyffryn!" 3) Council structure – described the new "flat" structure from chief executive down to frontline and councillor breakdown; 4) "Our people" – set out the HR perspective of the workforce as the "greatest asset". Repeated points from the HR strategy about culture, commitment, Team Dyffryn, and equal opportunities; 5) Competency – introduced the competency framework as a set of skills and behaviours "common to everyone"; 6) Mentors – presented the idea of mentors and that the viewer will soon be allocated with one; 7) Performance improvement – mentions CIP, project management (through KSPs etc.) and QBRs. Promotes project management as a "structured way to approach improvements"; 8) Probation – sets out the fact that every new worker has a six month probation; 9) Health and Safety – background to statutory rules about the work environment.

After talking to the HR advisors monitoring the progress of the induction, it was clear they felt it was not being used as much as they had hoped. Because individual departments managed the recruitment and selection process, there was no real opportunity for HR to interact with new recruits and give them the induction message. It was down to individual service heads to direct staff towards the induction and to collect a CD copy of the video and supporting documents. When I asked Barry if he directed new team members towards the induction he replied 'I sometimes do, but I'm not sure how useful the induction is really.' So the problem was a combination of unawareness of the new procedure and a lack of interest from service heads. Sue in the improvement planning team looked at the induction video and said "its good isn't it!" I asked her if many people knew about it and she said "I don't think everyone knows, HR don't communicate very well." They had put details on their intranet page and set around emails.

### **9.3.3 Mentoring**

One part of the induction process was now supposed to be mentoring. Mentors were intended to be more senior members of staff (e.g. team leaders, service managers)

from somewhere within the directorate the new individual is working. The mentor is supposed to organise monthly meetings to talk through any worries or questions. The mentoring checklist details the things that the mentor is supposed to go through in the first month. Once the checklist has been completed, the form is returned to the HR department.

**Table 8 Mentoring Induction checklist**

<b>Essential Actions</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Mentors Initials</b>
Tour of the building/work area		
Introduction to colleagues		
Explain lunch/break arrangements		
Notify telephone help desk of new starter's name		
Arrange for ID card photos to complete key card		
Explain annual leave arrangements		
Confirm arrangements to view corporate induction CD		
Explain smoking arrangements		
Location of toilets		
Introduce intranet		
Explain flexi system		
Coffee/teas making facilities		
Location of vending machines and staff rooms		
Magazine and newsletter location		
Organisational charts explained		
Explain sickness reporting procedure		
<b>Health and Safety Actions</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Mentor Initials</b>
Fire exits, procedure and fire wardens explained and understood		
Accident reporting procedure		
Work area security explained		
Introduce to first aider and location for first aid box		
<b>Other actions (optional)</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Mentor Initials</b>
Demonstrate telephone directory		
Order stationery and any other relevant equipment		
Explain how to obtain car park pass		
Advice how to obtain business cards		
Arrange desk and chair		
Location of changing areas		
Explain council building locations		
Training on use of photocopier		
Explain procedure to claim expenses, mileage		
Explain budget holder guidelines		
Explain about business reports		
Show how to save work on network		

From the people I had asked, no-one had seen or used this checklist. The new equalities officer in improvement planning who arrived after I finished my observations in the department had not been provided with details of the video or mentoring scheme during the first two weeks in the council. This was then yet another

scheme that the HR department had developed but had either not been properly implemented or had since gone by the wayside.

#### **9.3.4 Training and development**

Training and development was seen as a key priority under the new HR strategy. It was seen as a way to improve lacking management ability, particularly in areas that the audit commission identified as poor, such as performance management and time management. John's transformational strategy was also focussed on developing softer skills such as mentoring, coaching and conflict resolution. As the HR strategy notes, 'managers who have the technical expertise may not have the necessary people management skills'. Furthermore, it was seen as a way to improve morale. Training was an investment in the workforce and therefore seen as an intrinsic reward for workers.

The HR strategy action plan provided four different aspects of planned training and development. These were: first, developing a leadership and management training programme, including a leadership group to provides a forum for discussion and debate about leadership in Dyffryn CBC; second, understand the training needs of the wider workforce and develop a development provision for non-managerial staff; third, consider wider continuous professional development and forms of recognition, such as investors in people (IiP); fourth, develop a council-wide competency framework that will inform all other training and development initiatives. We will consider this process chronologically, from the training analysis through to the development of the leadership group, competency framework and finally the training programme.

##### *Training Needs Analysis*

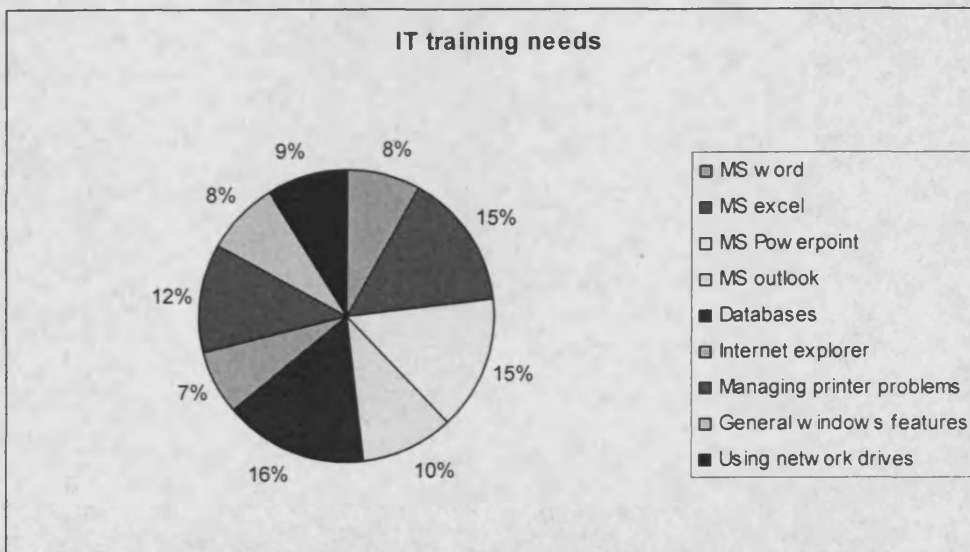
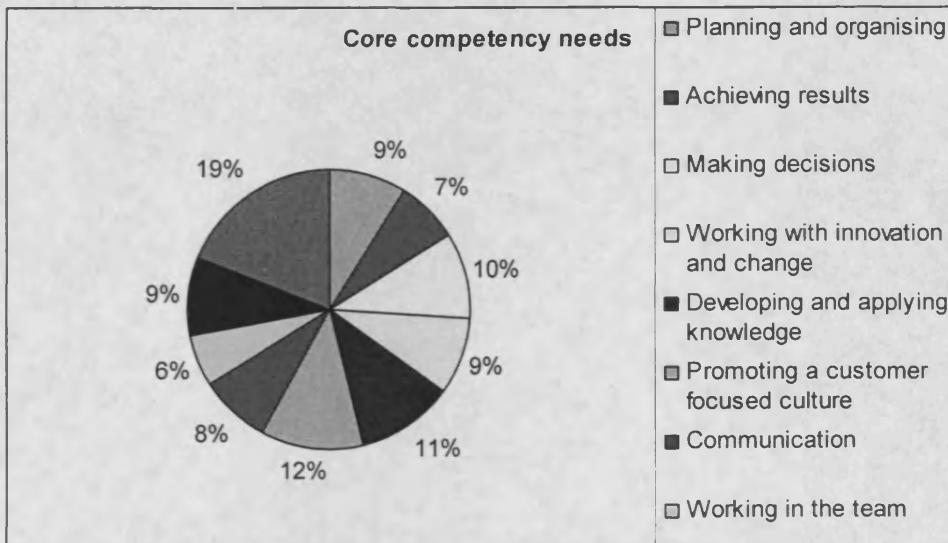
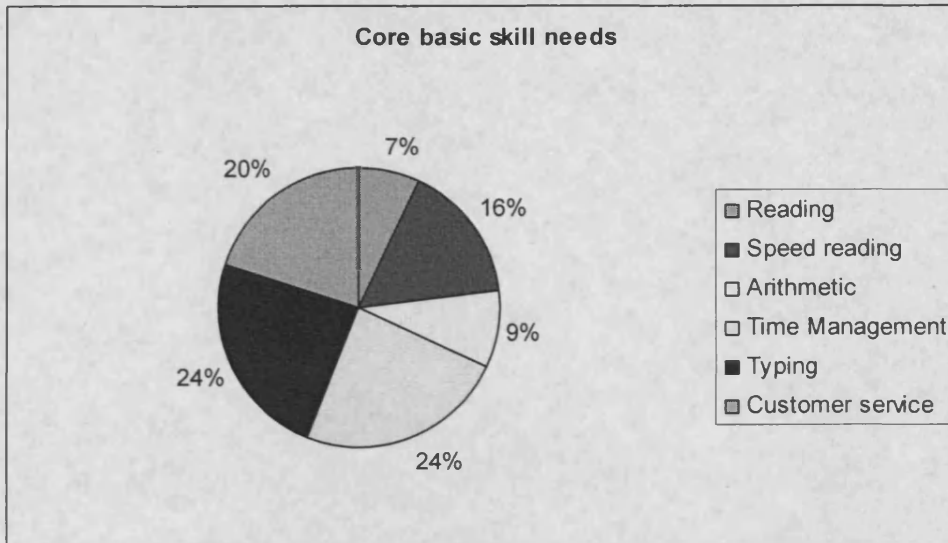
A Training needs analysis (TNA) was carried out by an HR consulting firm, Green Consulting, starting in early 2005. This project comprised conducting research and developing guidance about the training needs of the council workforce. The brief was wide and the consulting firm were given the freedom to develop the project as they saw fit. They decided to administer a survey based on a self-rated questionnaire. The questionnaire adopted rating scales such as 'I am comfortable negotiating' and 'I need to improve my reading skills', which were ranked according to a mixture of YES/NO responses and Likert scales (1-5). The questionnaire was administered between



February and July 2005. The original plan was for the training needs analysis to be the precursor to the main training programme. Green consulting placed a bid for the main training contract but they were unsuccessful. HR staff and those I talked to in Improvement Planning were not very impressed with Green consulting. They summarised and presented their findings at the end of July 2005. The plan was to link this analysis to the wider Dyffryn training strategies and future attempts to gain IiP status.

The TNA results were summarised into three different skill areas – core basic skills, core competencies and IT skills. From the documents I viewed, it was unclear how many people had responded to the survey, but the company claimed that it was a significant and representative sample from across the authority. The results are displayed below. Each table represents the percentage of respondents who felt that they *most needed* development in each skill area. In other words, respondents were told to choose one skill from a list that they felt they most needed (and/or wanted) to develop.

Figure 6 Consultants Training Report



The results were unsatisfactory to HR staff for obvious reasons. Mainly, it was unclear whether the individuals actually needed the skills for their jobs or whether they just liked the idea of getting training in the area. Furthermore, there was no indication whether workers needed training in several areas or just one. Finally, there was no breakdown into levels, departments or any other variable which would assist targeting training needs into a training programme. Overall, the TNA data was 'pretty useless and a waste of time' (Anna, HR department). I asked the HR advisor what they were going to do with the TNA. She replied,

What the training needs analysis will do... Oh wait, oh no it won't. It won't. It's been done a year and a half ago... I'm just thinking out loud now. .... I'm not sure really. It just wasn't very useful.

It seemed that they were trying to fit it in where possible but essentially they had wasted their money of this project and did not have any use for the results. For now non-managerial development was left to the individual service managers to develop with no specific training budget available. Instead, HR would focus their attention towards the centralised management and leadership training programme.

#### *Dyffryn Leadership Group (DLG)*

The first initiative introduced to develop the council management was a formal group of senior and middle management called the 'Dyffryn Leadership Group' (DLG). This would provide a forum for managers to come together from different departments and focus specifically on leadership needs. This pan-organisational group was seen as crucial to bring managers out of their departmental contexts and communication silos which had led to an embedded 'blame culture' identified by workers, managers and independent auditors. It was hoped that physically meeting each other, talking to each other and working together on development, would help the various interconnected departments to work more effectively and productively. The DLG was organised around periodic events, every four to eight weeks, with a formal agenda and theme for each meeting. Some events would be spent discussing a particular problem, such as sickness absence, whereas others may be introducing new initiatives like 360 degree appraisals. Every event was held during work hours and the venue was usually the council chamber. The membership of the MTLG was initially around forty managers, which then rose to forty five during the period of fieldwork. Barry said this was seen

as about the right size ‘to cover all of the main managers, but not have too many people there so as to become unmanageable’. The members include the chief executive, all directors, heads of department and a few lower level team leaders. As one team leader and member of the MTLG remarked, ‘it is for anyone who is anyone and a few rising stars.’

Barry summarised:

It has built momentum over the last few years. There is quite a good rapport among the managers. They do tend to sit in their cliques – service specific but they are trying to break this up – that’s what they did specifically for MD<sup>2</sup>. Some managers didn’t know who managers in other departments were so initially they were meeting each other and things. The group fits with the team ethos – we all belong to different teams but we are also all part of a bigger team and the managers can come along together and realise that. It was very useful to take the managers out of the office for the MD<sup>2</sup> sessions so people, didn’t wonder back to their office and say ‘I’ve just got to check an email.’ So I think the MD<sup>2</sup> has been a very useful vehicle, in my opinion.

We will consider the relative merits and limitations of the DLG along with the main training programme.

### *Management Development Programme (MD<sup>2</sup>)*

The training programme became known as MD<sup>2</sup> (which stood for Management Development, squared). Barry in improvement planning was leading on the management of the programme along with Norman, the old head of HR. Barry coined the term ‘MD<sup>2</sup>’ and explained that this meant “Management Development... plus a bit more kind of thing ... you know, like  $E=MC^2$ .” Barry seemed keen to choose a catchy name that sounded impressive. He defended his choice by informing me that “everyone seemed happy with it. At least it’s easy to remember!”

The MD<sup>2</sup> programme would last for two years (2003-2003) and was intended to train the top tiers of management and help facilitate the organisational transformation and management approach. The programme was accredited by the Institute of Management and Leadership (ILM) who provided a certificate on the condition of submitting an assignment at the end of the course. The programme was seen as the first cycle in a long-term policy of workforce development. It was hoped that there would be a second MD<sup>2</sup> programme starting in 2007 which would develop the next

level down, largely team leaders and supervisors, and any senior managers who felt they needed further training in one or two areas.

MD<sup>2</sup> was a central part of the DLG and would provide the subject matter for DLG discussions and events. DLG was seen as the forum where participants could encourage and support one another and reflect on their training experiences. The programme was delivered by an external training consultancy based nearby, Blue Consulting. According to Barry, they had received quotes from several firms and the winning firm was "...the best by far. They proved to be very professional and supportive all the way through." The training consultant's website and literature provided with the programme used the strap line: "delivering the essential elements of human resource solutions". Their advertised services covered a wide range of HR related activities including recruitment and selection techniques; training and development; performance improvement (such as performance management systems and competency frameworks); and change management (such as strategy and vision, culture change, flexibility and diversity management). About ten different trainers were involved in delivering the MD<sup>2</sup> programme at Dyffryn. Barry and the head of HR worked with the consultants to try to ensure the course content was tailored to their needs, rather than a standard off-the-shelf solution.

### *Competency framework*

The framework was developed through a process of consultation, including one-to-one meetings with a range of staff, focus groups with a mixture of management and staff, and external literature review. They then reviewed internal documents such as the improvement plan, transformational strategic plan and staff newsletters.

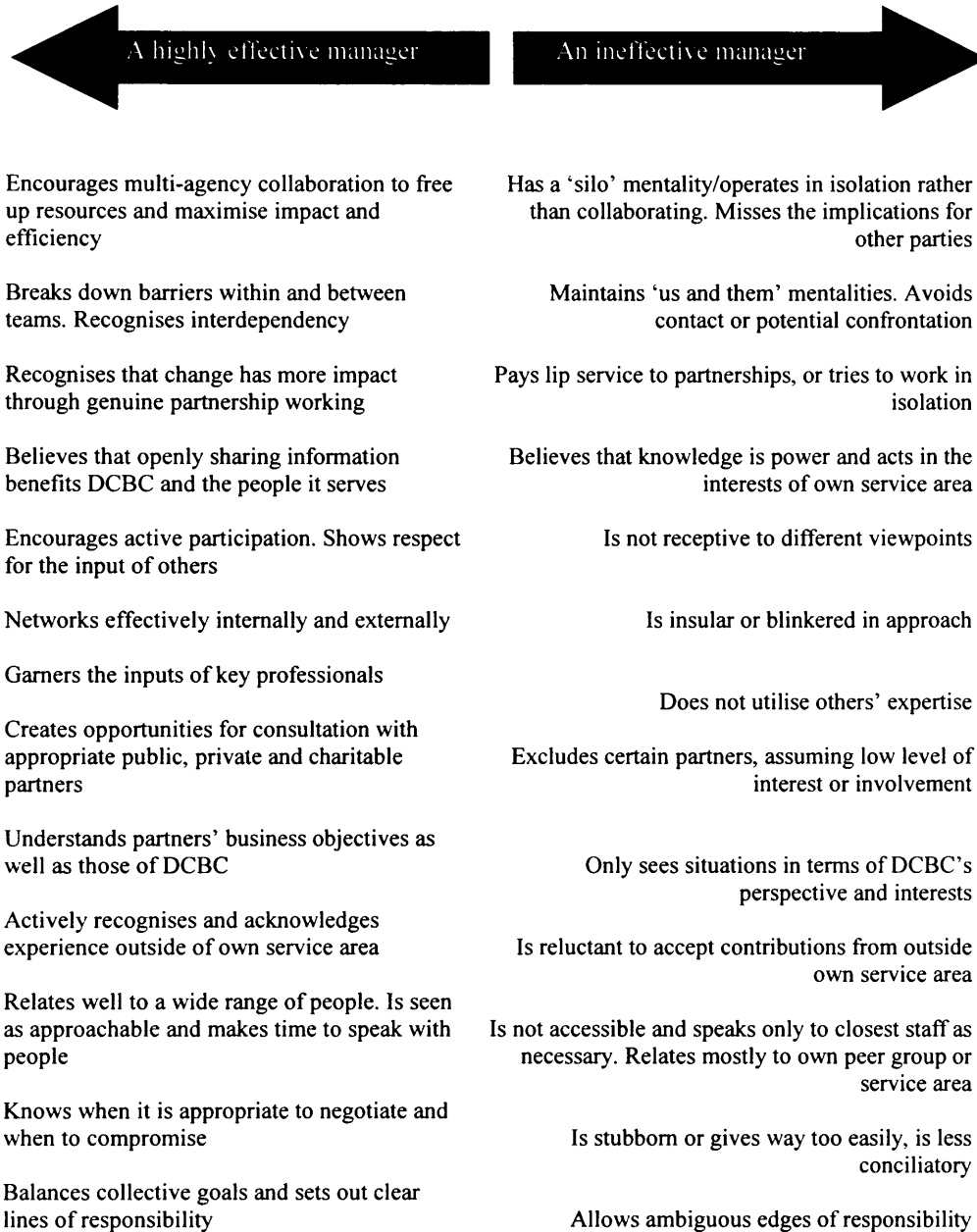
The competency framework was seen as an important part of the training process as it was an attempt to identify the skills needed to help the organisation improve. It was also to be used for the new performance appraisal framework (PPDP). This is discussed later.

The final result was ten competencies. These were: 1) leading people; 2) aligning strategy, plans and priorities; 3) drive for results; 4) developing people; 5) communicating; 6) working collaboratively; 7) creating a customer focused culture; 8)

managing the political interface; 9) facilitating innovation and change; and 10) evaluating and decision-making. The framework introduction describes each competency outline as specifying the 'perfect' DCBC leader. It is a standard for every leader to constantly strive towards. It suggests that comparing leaders against the framework will enable accurate specification of what they do well, and what they could do better. I have included one of the competencies as an example below.

Figure 7 Example Competency Measure

### Working Collaboratively (LG6)



The example above shows competency LG6 – working collaboratively. It is interesting that it depicts teamworking as a skill to be developed, such as 'recognising interdependency', 'sharing information', and 'encouraging active participation'. This

was then to be evaluated for individuals during the training programme and with the annual performance appraisal of everyone in the council.

### *The MD<sup>2</sup> process*

The first event in the MD<sup>2</sup> programme was a DLG meeting held in the council chamber, entitled 'Setting the Right Tone: Developing an optimistic Culture'. The meeting was a keynote presentation delivered by one of the directors of Blue Consulting, followed by group discussions and refreshments. The presentation content was focused on changing council employee attitudes away from a pessimism that had remained following the audit commission's interventions, towards an outlook where managers and staff were hopeful and enthusiastic about the future prospects of Dyffryn CBC. The presentation was intended to motivate the participants for the programme to come.

The main programme commenced shortly after the introductory event. The programme instruction was based around training 'modules' which were structured as two-day workshops or two-hour master classes spread over a period of eighteen months. All sessions were hosted at the consultant's headquarters about twenty five miles away from the Dyffryn. Barry said we wanted to do this to make the course a clear break from work so that people could focus their attention solely on the sessions and not be distracted by day-to-day work issues or keep popping back to their offices. "We wanted to make it a neutral, safe environment where people could feel free from the worries of work as much as possible and air their problems." (Barry)

I managed to persuade Barry to lend me his copy of the teaching materials provided with the course. The materials were a large collection of photocopied PowerPoint slides, Word documents, diagrams and questionnaires bound in a lever arch folder. The materials appeared characteristic of taught academic or corporate educational training materials laid out with 'learning outcomes' and then subject material. The course handbook described the purpose of the programme as 'designed to meet the individual and collective needs of DLG to help all staff become excellent leaders.' Participants were required to complete a number of compulsory modules, labelled 'towards excellence' modules, and were given a choice of further 'additional



modules' depending on their role and experience. The course handbook listed the following modules for the programme:

### Figure 8 Course Module list

1. Understanding, motivating, developing and leading teams (1 day)
2. Learning and managing stress in the workplace (1 day)
3. Strategy (part 1) – Translating strategy into reality (2 hours)
4. Strategy (part 2) – Translating into reality (2 hours)
5. Principles of time management (2 hours)
6. Principles of time management (refresher) (1 day)
7. Developing capacity (1 day)
8. Principles of project management (2 hours)
9. Coaching for enhanced performance (2 days)
10. Bridging the performance gap (1 day)
11. Delivering effective presentations (2 day)
12. Meeting management toolkit (2 hour)
13. Enhanced customer focus (1 day)
14. Leading and facilitating change (1 day)
15. Creative thinking and problem solving toolkit (part 1) (2 hours)
16. Creative thinking and problem solving (part 2) (2 hours)
17. Delegation skills (2 hours)

It can be seen from the list that a wide range of skills were covered. There was a strong team component – the materials for modules 1, 2, 8, 9, 12, 14, 17 all discussed the skills needed for either leading or working within work teams. The academic/practitioner teamworking literature featured in many of the modules. The theories utilised included, Belbin team roles; Tuckman team development stages; Maslow hierarchy of needs; various other motivation theories including Herzberg two-factor theory; creative techniques such as brainstorming; Edmonson's team learning environment, Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristic Model; Japanese management through idea of 'lean'; Business process re-engineering (BPR); and Coleman's emotional intelligence.

Another clear focus was on performance and project management. This was a focus in modules 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10. In most cases, a summary of theory was presented followed by a group discussion about the practical applications within Dyffryn CBC. We will consider the experiences of the programme participants shortly.

In addition to the teaching modules every participant was asked to complete a series of psychometric assessments that were administered during the first few teaching sessions. These included a 'transactional analysis' (Berne, 1961); learning styles

questionnaire (Honey and Mumford, 1982), creativity quotient; and ‘Jung Type Indicator’ personality test. Discovering that the participants had been asked to do this, later the new head of HR told me about this with a bemused look on her face,

I thought Blimey, it’s a bit much! I wouldn’t have been so brave as to administer psychometric tests, especially in Dyffryn.

The transactional analysis was used to analyse the style and approach people adopted towards social interactions and their default leadership style. The so-called transactional ‘ergo-gram’ mapped the way individuals treat relationships with others according to three categories: ‘parent’, ‘adult’ and ‘child’. The ‘parent’ describes someone who speaks down to others and assumes a position where they feel they need to enforce authority and impart wisdom upon their ‘child’. The ‘adult’ category tries to build relationships based on mutual respect and responsibility. Lastly, the ‘child’ assumes a playful position but is also likely to ignore others and only act on strict commands. Each participant gets a score of either ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ for each category. The ‘ideal’ score is said to differ depending on context. For example, while trying to be creative and exploratory, Child>Child relationships might be preferable. However, in many cases the Adult>Adult is seen as most appropriate. The worst relationship in most situations, it is said, is the Adult>Child when leading people. Improvement Planning team leader, Rhi, made frequent use of this framework in her general office discussion following the programme. She referred to one manager in planning as “very poor... he has a very parent – child style of management.” She also referred to effective meetings as those where everyone adopted an “adult – adult mindset”. In this sense, these training materials had explicitly affected the management discourse.

Other aspects of the psychometric assessments seemed to have less application for the participants. The Honey and Mumford (1982) Learning styles questionnaire is often used by consultants and trainers when introducing the topic of learning. During the MD<sup>2</sup> programme it was used to assess the different ways in which individuals approach learning new subjects and then use this to understand individual strengths and appreciate the importance of other people’s learning styles in team situations. After a series of statements such as, ‘I tend to think long and hard about something before acting’, each individual is plotted along two axes. One axis goes from

'Activist' to 'Reflector' and the other from 'Theorist' to 'Pragmatist'. Participants were effectively given a learning 'score' and then were encouraged to share each other's styles. When I interviewed managers and asked about this part of the assessment they said it was interesting but did not really have a day-to-day application. Similarly, the personality tests seemed to be another thing that was "interesting" but was perceived as not very relevant for training needs. The personality test was used to plot people along Karl Jung's four types: Introvert-Extrovert; Sensing-Intuitive; Thinking-Feeling; Judging-Perceiving. After asking a few people, participants told me they simply discussed with everyone else what they 'were' and 'what this might mean'. One commission officer in IAS recalled,

We just looked around the room, guessed what each other were and tried to understand each other a bit more! A real surprise was that John (chief executive) came up as an introvert! I would never have said that. But the facilitator said people can be introverts but they can deal with it and come across as confident. There were some people where I thought 'you're never an extrovert' but after you had watched them for a while, you thought, 'Oh yeah, maybe you are after all'.

It wasn't clear in the training materials the intention behind discovering a measure of each leader's personality, apart from identifying that people have different personalities.

The reaction of participants to the MD<sup>2</sup> experience was generally very positive. Managers in various directorates recorded how they felt the experience was very worthwhile. However, there were some managers, mainly men, who regarded the course as "very much a refresher" (Director IAS) and that the material was basic in comparison to qualifications that already had, like MBAs or MPAs. This came through with the assignment requirement at the end of the course. To pass the ILM qualification and receive a certificate, each participant had to submit a 2,000 word written assignment at the end of the course. Of the forty five participants, only seventeen submitted a written assignment (Barry).

During normal office activities and routines following MD2, workers often commented on the change in leadership style or ability among the management team as a result of the training process. For example, Rhi recalled that the director of Corporate Centre was not a "natural" leader and not very confident in group

leadership situations. However, as a result of the training she has become “so much better” at leadership activities like chairing meetings and giving presentations. Some managers, however, seem to not have benefited from the process in this way. Rhi added that the head of service for regeneration “has got worse as a result [of MD<sup>2</sup>] because she thought the training confirmed that she was already doing well”. This seemed to be a negative side effect of the self-rating psychometric tests; because people rated themselves, if they came out as being strong in certain areas they would feel that they had no need to change or improve. They would end up saying to their staff or in their performance appraisals things like “[MD<sup>2</sup>] demonstrated that I am a good manager” and who could argue against them?

Other aspects of the training seeped into management discourse and behaviours. Barry frequently made use of a motivational theory called ‘stroking’. This was something taught in module 1 (motivating and leading teams) and module 9 (coaching). It was the idea that providing fellow team members with periodic/strategic complements, such as ‘that’s a nice tie’ would improve the self-esteem of team members and therefore increase team morale and motivation. This could also be used to resolve conflicts. When someone made a complement towards Barry, he often replied “stop trying to stroke me, what do you want?” Rhi also made reference to it in conversations with Barry. It was largely used as a light hearted rhetorical device. Barry and Rhi used it to be playful and sarcastic. The notion of ‘stroking’ also carried a cynicism that complements were merely used for manipulative purposes: “what do you want?”

Another aspect of training which came through in the office environment was delegation. The issue was how much management should delegate tasks to their teams. Rhi frequently worried about this, saying things like “I know I’m supposed to delegate but...” Rhi felt pressure that MD2 set the benchmark of management behaviour and she now had to maintain the prescribed standard.

### *Training Assignment*

The final assignment for the course ran as follows: ‘Describe a minimum of two ways of thinking and new skills you have learnt during MD<sup>2</sup>’ (2000-2500 words)

While it was difficult to get hold of these assignments, the response of one participant, Rhi, was very illuminating. This particular employee had joined the DLG later than most middle and senior management and said she was included because of the recognition that she was a “rising star” and “mover and shaker” within the organisation. In her assignment essay she notes, “Membership of the DLG itself has bought a certain amount of kudos and prestige amongst colleagues.” Not surprisingly, her written work was strongly in praise of the MD<sup>2</sup> programme. She used her assignment to chart her journey through the programme and note her developments. It is worth quoting some extended narrative from the essay for illustration.

The introductory parts of the essay identify some up-beat general points about how the training had developed her ability to manage a team:

Following the career development workshops, I used various techniques to progress the project and develop a positive team spirit within [my team]. Throughout this project I have varied the formats of the group meetings to encourage creative thinking and involve all members as well as acknowledging individual and group success.

...The coaching skills I have developed from MD<sup>2</sup> have allowed me to support some of the less confident members of the team where they have encountered difficulties on the project. Previously I would not have been as clear about each person’s responsibilities within the actions plans and not have monitored progress as closely. I also would have been inclined to direct the less confident members of the team towards a course of action I though was right as opposed to using coaching skills to help them arrive at an appropriate decision.

So far so good. She introduced the ideas of varying the team routines to encourage creativity and also discussed coaching skills as assisting the less confident individuals to develop the ability to make good decisions. However, the idea of team coach subsequently takes an unexpected turn later in the essay:

I have also been very pro-active in following things up with team members to the point of being called a ‘nag’, whereas previously I would have overlooked actions that were running behind schedule. I have become much more direct in my approach during the course of the meetings that has often resulted in disagreements about a course of action. Prior to MD<sup>2</sup>, I would have probably deferred to peers opinions and not challenged suggestions as furtively [*sic*]. Most notably though, is my new-found ability to take decisions which are not going to be popular with staff but are ultimately to the benefit of the corporate whole and therefore achieve the Council’s vision and aims. I have not held improvements in abeyance to accommodate the wishes of staff.

Here the ‘coach’ has turned distinctively into the ‘cop’. Close monitoring, ‘nagging’ and a ‘much more direct approach.’ Rather than letting team members come to their own well-reasoned decisions, they are now being put in their place and are being challenged. Instead of valuing every team members, there are even utilitarian sentiments at the end of the paragraph whereby ‘improvements’ are not to be held in ‘abeyance to accommodate the wishes of staff.’ Performance, not the team, is the most important issue. This change of tune becomes even more pronounced in subsequent paragraphs.

...the benefit of being more forthright and tenacious with the project is that as a team we have managed to effect significant efficiencies and improvements within tight timescales and limited resources.

So it appears that the stronger leadership style has resulted in more productivity and work intensification. Yet not only this, a more direct leadership style has also given Rhi a taste of power; an experience which she seems to have enjoyed:

It has been rewarding to have approached this project in a *radical* [emphasis added], dynamic way as opposed to a more bureaucratic style.

...Being so bold in decision-making has felt liberating at times

...The MD<sup>2</sup> programme has had a profound impact in the way I approach my work on a daily basis.

It seems that to some extent the change of leadership Rhi desired was to a more direct authoritarian control more so than any other style. The surprising conclusion is that as a result of her new leadership credentials she commented:

I feel that I am part of Team Dyffryn, that I have an important role to play within that team, and that I am valued by my colleagues for the contribution I am making towards achieving excellence as an organisation.

Linking these observations with the previous discussion about delegation, we get strong message about the effect of the training on Rhi. The training programme had awakened Rhi attention and anxiety towards being a good manager. She wanted to justify her position among the “movers and shakers” of the organisation. Delegation was a skill she most worried about. She took the advice to her heart and felt that she should be delegating as much work as she could to the team. When she had attempted to exercise these new skills in team situations, she felt empowered, like she was doing well against the MD<sup>2</sup> standards. This then explained how she felt “liberated” by being a more direct and commanding leader. She was clearly focussed on the performance

of the organisation but was she following the Team Dyffryn approach to get to this improvement in performance?

### *MD<sup>2</sup> feedback*

As mentioned earlier, the feedback from the training process was on the whole very positive. This interpretation was reinforced by one of the HR officers overseeing training considerations across the authority.

I think the MD<sup>2</sup> feedback was positive. The feedback from staff that are managed by the managers attending the course is that since then it has got better. I think there was a need for it. Before, because people had been here for so long and they had been promoted to manager they didn't necessarily have the management skills. They had excellent skills to deliver the service, but not necessarily the management skills. So I understand the training covered a lot of these bases. But there wasn't maybe as much follow up on the training as we would have liked. They need to make sure they are applying what they learnt. (Mike, HR advisor)

At the end of the course there was an evaluation questionnaire that the HR department used as a gauge for the general success of the programme. Of the forty five participants for the course, fifteen completed the evaluation - a response rate of thirty three per cent. The questionnaire used a list of statements which were placed along Likert scales from 5-1. 5 denoting 'very much'; 4 'good extent'; 3 'moderately'; 2 'a little'; and 1 'Not at all'. A summary of the results are below:

**Table 9 Training Programme Feedback**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Mean (2 dec.)</b>	<b>SD (2 dec.)</b>
Have you enjoyed the programme?	4.50	0.52
Do you consider the programme a valuable investment of time?	4.25	0.62
To what extent has the programme helped you to understand your role in achieving the corporate vision?	3.67	0.89
To what extent has the MD2 programme helped you to deliver your role?	3.67	0.89
To what extent do you feel that you work more effectively with internal or external partners than previously?	3.58	0.79
To what extent has the programme helped you to understand other people's roles better?	3.75	0.87

<b>Table 9 (Continued)</b>		
To what extent has the programme increased your own skills/abilities?	3.92	0.79
To what extent have you applied what you have learned in the workplace?	3.58	0.66
To what extent do you believe that you will behave more effectively as result of the programme?	3.50	0.80
Have you passed on any of the things you have learnt to other colleagues in your department?	3.00	0.43
To what extent has the programme made you feel more valued and supported by the council?	3.58	1.00
To what extent has the programme made you feel more committed to the organisation?	3.33	0.78
What do you think have been the benefits in terms of:		
• Leadership group identity	4.27	0.79
• Number of Relationships across the group	4.00	0.78
• Quality of relationships across the group	3.55	0.52
• Increased knowledge of other service areas	3.45	0.82
• Relationships with other people in your department	2.36	1.03
• Increased personal confidence	3.27	0.65
• Increased personal skills	3.73	0.91
Which parts of the programme have been most useful?		
• Competency framework	3.36	1.02
• MTLG whole group sessions	3.00	0.45
• Motivational speaker	2.50	0.84
• Core modules	3.78	1.01
• Additional modules	3.91	0.83
• SMB facilitation	2.70	1.16

The strongest positive result is whether people enjoyed the programme, with a mean of 4.50. It appeared that overall everyone thought that the programme was well worthwhile and personally rewarding. In terms of individual skills and abilities, the respondents were also generally positive (mean 3.92). However, the practical implications of the course were slightly less promising with a mean of 3.58 for ‘applying what you have learnt’; 3.50 for ‘behaving more effectively as a result’ and a notably lower score of 3.00 for ‘passing on things you have learnt to other colleagues.’ In the ‘what have been the benefits’ section of the questionnaire, the ‘relationships with other people in your department’ received the lowest score of 2.36 (s.d. 1.03). This suggested that, overall, participants did not learn anything that either necessitated or enabled an improvement in the relationship among the team. This is worrying for the priorities of John’s transformed Team Dyffryn. In the ‘most useful’ section, both the core modules and additional modules received the highest scores with 3.78 (s.d. 1.01) and 3.91 (s.d. 0.83) respectively.



At the end of the questionnaire there were a series of open ended questions that are worth highlighting. These are summarised along with representative responses:

What do you see as the cultural changes within the organisation as a result of the programme? On balance, there were more positive statements than negative. These responses included:

- ...the DLG is developing a feeling on unity which should assist in working together
- ...a sense of ownership for change incorporating all senior managers, not just directors
- ...strengthening of the 'Team Dyffryn' approach
- ...a change in attitude regarding the silo mentality and blame culture
- ...A focus on the organisation as a whole instead of being concerned with just your department/area of responsibility.

These were perhaps the model Team Dyffryn responses, just what John would want to hear. Some other comments, positive, albeit reticent and more down-beat were:

- ...Recognition at last of the frustrations felt by a lot of managers about the requirement to develop members of the DLG. This had resulted in a further development of the team ethos and understanding of other managers' demands, pressures, successes and failures. This has minimised a blame culture to some extent.
- ...culture appears positive but some scepticism from some
- ...it has begun the process of 'silo' demolition in many areas although some remain staunchly entrenched and resistant to a truly corporate approach which means tempering departmental and personal ambitions for the greater good of the employer. There is still a sense of blame culture supported by overt comments and statement in some cases.

The next few questions focussed on the specific modules that people found most and least useful. Under most useful, stress management coaching and times management were popular options. Under least, there were more general statements about the overly-theoretical nature of the course with not enough attention on the practical implications. The following question, suggestions for improvement, followed a similar line of argument: 'more tailored', 'more on transferring theory into practice' and 'more feedback and practicality'. The final question was about what the organisation can now do to support the outcomes of the training. Responses were about senior management listening to the changes required. They took a relatively critical perspective:

- ...Management at the most senior levels need to listen to feedback from the training sessions and be prepared to adapt where necessary.

...Change more – listen more – become more open. After a partial absence that “blame” culture is hovering in the background.

...The investment in the current training programme represents a welcome major reversal of at least two decades of minimal training. There must be a demonstration that this reversal will extend beyond the DLG

...the still extant blame culture will have to be addressed if staff are to be prepared to exercise their new skills and empowerment.

#### *Further reflections of training*

As more junior staff, Ryan and Jen were keen to get onto the training programme. It was seen as an exciting opportunity that could lead to further opportunities in promotion, etc. They both asked Barry about the training quite regularly. Ryan was pencilled in as a probable participant in the next training but Jen wasn't because she was seen as less dynamics. Thus, it was the ones who displayed hope as managers that were seen more eligible for the training programme.

#### **9.3.5 Performance appraisals**

Before the arrival of the new regime and the HR strategy, appraisals were informal and patchy across the authority. There was no formal appraisal policy and managers conducted them when they saw fit. Many members of staff never had any appraisals, particularly those working part-time. One HR officer, Brian, reflected:

I joined the organisation a year ago [starting May 2005] and there wasn't anything. There weren't any performance appraisals basically.

With the transformation and the new HR strategy, the intention was now to roll out routine appraisals across the whole authority under a scheme called 'Personal Performance Development Plan' (PPDP). This was another one of John's 'private sector practice' interventions. The new policy stated that all workers, whether full-time or part-time, required a yearly appraisal conducted by line managers, and an informal review every quarter.

To phase in the programme the first stage was to conduct appraisals with all directors. John conducted all of the director appraisals as semi-formal interviews. He then used this experience to consult with the HR department about the structure of the new PPDP process. The next stage was for the directors to conduct appraisals with all service heads. John gave some advice to his directors in an executive board meeting and the HR department provided further guidance on the new PPDP form. This

process spanned from January 2006 – April 2006. The final stage was to appraise all team leaders and frontline staff. This would conclude the yearly cycle. The initial part of this stage was to train all heads of service in conducting appraisals, since some had never given appraisal interviews before. However, this process became more difficult than first hoped. Brian explained:

We wanted to train the heads of service how to conduct appraisals with their team but the problem was that we couldn't find a clear organisational chart. We knew how many people were in the organisation, but we didn't know how many were at each tier, and so how many each managed. So we took it tier by tier and worked out who was supposed to be managing who. We are now working out the last tier.

This was a surprising obstacle considering this was all after the grand restructure and introduction of the 'star ship enterprise' that John had raved about. Once they had developed a clear idea of the organisational charts they could see how many appraisals each service manager and team leader was required to conduct. I was provided with a spreadsheet breaking this information down. Whereas most manager/team leaders had between six to ten appraisals to conduct per yearly some departments were structured so that individual managers had to carryout many more. Table 10 illustrates this.

**Table 10 Performance Appraisal list**

<b>Service Area</b>	<b>Team leader</b>	<b>No. PPDP</b>
Revenues and Council tax	Geoff	17
	Jenny	20
	Danny	25
Recreation and Sport	Peter	25
	Chris	21
Environmental Services	Jeremy (Refuse)	38
Housing	Karen	18
Care Homes	Margret (Home 1)	32
	Margret (Home 2)	28

The table shows a wide variation. Care homes were a particular anomaly. One care home appeared to have only one main manager, Margret, with no team leaders. Margret was then scheduled to carryout 60 appraisals on her own. If this was conducted during normal working hours, it would take two weeks of solid working

hours to get through these, if each appraisal lasted one hour. This was clearly too much work, even if it was spread over several months. In another care home, there was no such problem because they had broken down the management structure into multiple team leaders. Each leader was responsible for around five appraisals, which left the service manager with only ten appraisals with the team leaders.

In addition to the considerable administrative task and reorganisation of management structures in some departments, there was also the problem of resistance from many service heads, who were either apprehensive about delivering the PPDPs or were dismissive about benefit of such a process. Training officer Brian was instructive again here:

The culture here - I don't know how you have found it – but its like people saying, 'this is something we have never done before, now you are asking me to do all this. How am I supposed to find time for that?' So first it was trying to influence people that performance appraisal is a good thing.

.... One classic comment was: 'look [Brian], you are new here. I have been here for thirty years. All I do is come to work, do my job, and go home. Suddenly now you are telling me I have to think about my job and enjoy it.' I just wanted to laugh but at the same time had to say 'Okay, I know this is really hard for you, you have never thought about performance objectives before.' They just appeared to come to work and do what they were told.

... another case was one head of service I met with. He was so uncomfortable that we spend several hours going through the appraisal process with him and then he wanted me to sit in his first few attempts and the first one took him three hours. He said to me, 'But I've never had a conversation with that person before.' That was someone in his team and he was the head of service! It was a real shock to me how much we had to change.

The implementation of PPDP was clearly a difficult and slow process. The appraisal of the scheme at the time of the fieldwork (July 06) was a typically euphemistic: 'we are getting there slowly' (Gary, HR). However, in reality they were considerably behind schedule on the final main stage of the appraisals. Brian was confident that by the end of the year everyone would have had an appraisal and they would then hopefully be onto the second cycle. Somewhat optimistically, Brian informed me:

The long-term idea is that we will relate it to pay, but we don't mention that yet! That would be a bit too radical at this stage.

My observations in the improvement planning team had revealed first-hand experience of the PPDP implementation process, or rather the lack of it. Barry had not

conducted his team's appraisals in the time he had supposed to because he was 'too busy'. He was going to carry out the interviews with Ryan, Sue and Jen; while Rhi was going to cover the Com girls, Danielle and Sharon. For the team the PPDP seemed to be a sensitive issue. When I gently asked Sue about what PPDP entailed, she replied very defensively, 'It's appraising us, what do you want to know about it?' The consensus within the improvement planning team appeared to be that the whole thing was a waste of time, just another administrative task to get in the way of working. No one appeared to view it as a positive developmental activity; it was seen more as a threat to their pay and even their job. When anyone made references to it, people would mumble to themselves or let out a sigh to demonstrate their disinterest. One afternoon, Ryan and Sue were complaining about the design of the newly developed PPDP form. They thought that there was not enough space to fill in each section; 'All HR forms are just crap', Sue barked. They discussed with each other what sort of thing they were writing under each section.

#### *PPDP Appraisal format*

The PPDP process was based around a main appraisal form. This was a ten page document divided into two main sections – performance review (reflecting last twelve months) and developmental review (looking forward to next twelve months). Most of the document was filled out by the appraisee before the appraisal meeting with the line manager. The first part of performance section was a review of agreed objectives over the last twelve months and an indication of how these have been achieved. There were space for up to six key objectives and a box for estimating the percentage completion and success of each objective. The next part was a review of competencies. This was directly based on the new competency framework devised before the MD<sup>2</sup> programme. For this section, the appraisee and appraising manager worked together during the meeting to fill this out. The aim was for the two parties to come an agreement or compromise for each score. This was based on a competence scale from 1-5 (1 being 'fully competent' and 5 being 'below the standard expected'). The appraised categories were: Planning and organising; Achieving Results; Making decisions; Working with innovation and change; Developing and applying knowledge; Being Professional; Building relationships; Communication; Promoting a customer-focused culture; Working in a team; and Negotiating.

Also in the performance review section there was a part for continuous improvement. Each individual had to offer up to three changes they have suggested/implemented which helped improve systems, processes or procedures. This clearly linked with the CIP programme. It was interesting how the team process of the quality circles was now being used to judge individuals – to find who actually made the suggestions in the CIP meetings. Wasn't this going against the ethos of CIP?

HR advisor Brian was taking me through the PPDP form to explain it. Half-way through explaining the process he stopped and looked at me,

I'm sounding really negative aren't I? I'm passionate about it but it's a battle... it's such a battle! ... For example, with objectives part, some employees will say things like 'I haven't got any objectives - I just come to work and do my job'.

I was clear that it was taking a huge amount of effort to get people to understand and appreciate the purpose of the PPDP. With an organisation of 3,000 employees, spending several hours having to explain the process to individual managers was an inefficient way to get the programme implemented. However, this was the only way Brian and the other HR managers were able to get some managers and staff to buy into the process.

The second half of the PPDP form was the development review for the next twelve months. The first part of this was 'competency objectives'. This was a chance to identify skill areas for improvement and how they might go about improving this area (for example, attending training courses or certain meetings). This section was kept very open. Next was a space to list all of the current 'responsibilities' and 'accountabilities' that form the basis for the current job role (this was also intended to feed into the job evaluation). This was filled out prior to the meeting but also a separate column used by the appraiser to comment on the response and/or confirm it. The final section was open for additional comments such as career aspirations.

### *360 degree appraisals*

A final consideration with the performance appraisal process is 360 degree appraisals. This was one of the ideas *Blue Consulting* proposed as a means of measuring the

change in management performance as a result of the MD<sup>2</sup> programme. This would therefore only be applicable for managers who attended the programme.

The 360 degree format was for managers to be appraised not only by a single line manager but by a range of people at different levels of the hierarchy around the appraisee. It was therefore intended to provide a more informative and reliable measure of the appraisee's performance. The plan was to have three or four appraisers per person who would each fill out a PPDP form. The appraisee was allowed to choose the range of people doing the appraisals. In some ways, it therefore reflected providing personal references. Barry reflected on the scheme:

I know it sounds a bit masochistic but I am looking forward to my appraisal because I like the fact you can say 'yes you have certain strengths but they could be development in other ways'. As long as it is a constructive challenge to something, you know. You have to be aware that sometimes people can say something for your own good. I know a few people that I would no way give the form to, not because I'm scared of what they might say, just because it would be so skewed.

While one can sympathise with Barry here, his words demonstrate that 360 degree appraisals were not necessarily any more objective or insightful than a single appraiser because each manager could select those who they thought would give them a good assessment. If Barry was worried about his results being skewed negatively, maybe those in HR should be worried that the result would be skewed the other way. This could weed out the worst managers who could not find anyone to give them a positive review but not the majority who would have some close colleagues at different levels in the organisation.

### **9.3.6 Job evaluation**

A job evaluation process started early in 2006. Linked to the restructure that occurred in 2004, the pay grades of employees across the organisation were now being reassessed to check whether the current roles and responsibilities matched their salary and benefits. The job evaluation was based on a lengthy questionnaire which each individual were required to fill out and then get checked by their line manager. The questionnaire also recommended that trade unions and mentors were also involved in the process. The questionnaire included topics such as: the purpose of the job; main responsibilities; people responsible for; demands for creativity and innovation;

number and range of contacts required for job; types of decisions needed to be made; management of resources; work demands; and knowledge and skill required.

The job evaluation process was discussed earlier with Rhi disappointment at not being awarded a formal promotion to team leader pay and benefits. Senior HR advisor Gary gave some reflections about the process:

With job evaluation we are reviewing everyone under something called the green book with certain pay and conditions. ... We are making good progress with this. Everyone soon will have a new pay grade. There are not that many changes being made really. There will be winners and losers but I wouldn't have thought the winners would be substantial - might be a few thousand pounds. I like to think we haven't been too out of sync up to now really. So it will be quite minor gains and loses. It might even be five hundred pounds.

And on the issue of team leaders?

Some team leaders are quite operational roles I suppose. They will have some strategic overview but the main strategic role will be the service head.

... The ones that lose out in job evaluation are the operational people, where you can't give them recognition for full strategic role because that's the head of service. They may have been over-egged in the past and now it is not commensurate. So in confidence, you have someone like Barry in improvement planning and then you have Rhiannon and there isn't a lot of difference in salaries there. But when you look at what the expectations are of the two roles, you see that you don't need such a high team leader, because the roles may overlap. Especially in a small services like that.

Gary provided confirmation that some team leaders were not seen according to the 'green book' as occupying the responsibility of more formal management positions. They were in his words more 'operational'. This was the reason that Rhi was not given a promotion in the job evaluation process.

### **9.3.7 Trade unions**

HR Strategy also discusses process of consultation with unions: 'consultation in this context will mean 'the exchange of views and establishment of a dialogue between Dyffryn Tydfil CBC, its employees and trade union representatives.' The comments of HR advisors were in general agreement about the council relationship with the unions. The comments of one advisor summed this up:

We have a relatively good relationship with the unions. We work quite closely with them. It's not a very venomous relationship. It's not like the private sector, in a local authority we are expected to do things right and go by the rules book, so that means getting them on board. It's like a joint partnership



approach. We tell them our views on a new policy, get their views and opinions, see if they want to change anything. Then we write it up, check with them again and get it finalised. Then we get it verified through council. We don't cut them out of the consultation process. In fact we have recently developed a trade union communication and consultation policy inline with a piece of employment legislation that was out in 2005 where we set formal consultation mechanisms. We invite unions onto SMB and exec board so they can't complain we are not getting them involved and discussing service development and changes to practices so they have the opportunity to speak up. Very close relationship. Obviously there is the odd one or two.

They have been fine with PPDP which is a good communication tool. What they probably won't be happy with when we do the new pay and grading review which is implemented in April 2007 which links with the job evaluation we will be looking to introduce a performance based progression system. We are all on a pay scales and you have incremental points. As it stands at the moment all you have to do is turn up to work and you get a guaranteed pay increment so after four or five years you get to the top of the scale. So we are looking to link PPDP to pay so that will be the basis for demonstrating you have performed well enough to get the increment. It will be difficult getting this through the trade unions because traditionally you turn up to work and you could be the worst employee in the world but you will be paid and get your pay rise at the end of the year. We have had provision discussion with them on this. I would like to let them drop them down but I don't think they would have that! (Gary, HR advisor)

#### **9.4 Discussion of HRM findings**

The Dyffryn HR strategy and related practices followed the trends of the wider council change programme. There were many good intentions but little real implementation and progress. A few years into the HR strategy the initial enthusiasm had given way to fatigue and general inertia. The comments of the senior HR advisor - 'I'm sounding really negative aren't I ... it's just a battle' – typify this situation.

Teamworking is often described as an essential component of HRM and HPWS (Godard, 2004). HR practices provide the context in which teams operate and the supporting framework for team processes to work effectively. HRM was a central part of the strategic transformation and John's private sector practices. The main HR approach was set out in the HR strategy and implemented through a range of HR practices including training, performance appraisal and job evaluation.

Quantitative studies of HR systems have suggested that specific configurations of HR practices can have a pronounced affect on performance – both at an individual and

organisational level (e.g. Bacon and Blyton, 2000). However, qualitative studies tend to be more conservative or critical in their assessment. For example, Currie and Procter (2003) report the implementation of a parsimonious and narrow form of teamworking in the Inland Revenue. Here they conclude that a strong HR context was not required for this particular team form to function effectively.

Procter and Mueller (2000) suggest that three areas are likely to be most significant in relation to HR and teams. These are rewards and appraisals, training and development, and industrial relations. Like many other empirical team studies teams, in Dyffryn there was little experimentation with reward systems and little hope of movement beyond basic individual systems.

The previous head of HR had worked closely with the chief executive to implement his HR transformations. When the new head of HR arrived the managerial approach changed markedly. She had come from a competitive private sector background and followed what could be described as a 'hard HR' perspective. In contrast to the discourse of 'Team Dyffryn', the new head saw teamworking as a shallow gimmick good for people 'who like that kind of thing'. This showed the extent to which strategic directions can be concentrated with a few senior managers. The HR team picked up on the new head's lack of enthusiasm for the team approach. Some followed the new head and suggested that Team Dyffryn was all a bit 'cheesy'. Others said they liked the team approach but could see that the new head was trying to make things more focussed on efficiency. As a result of the management change, the HR focus was shifted away from 'soft' approaches of recruitment and selection and training towards 'harder' aspects such as sickness costs and job scale evaluation.

### *Training*

Training is frequently cited as a crucial component of team development from both STS and Japanese traditions. However, empirical studies frequently report that inadequate provisions are made in this area. For instance, Dunphy and Bryant (1996) suggest that organisations rarely are willing to consider the costs associated with training team members – both financial and time resources.

The initial training needs analysis conducted by an external consultant was regarded as a waste of money by the HR department. The results were not very instructive and could not be used to inform the main training process. This is an example of the potential risks of hiring consultants to assist in developmental activities. Several people, including the new head of HR, had commented during the research that they preferred using external consultants than internal training providers because they have no attachment to the organisation and they can provide a candid assessment. However, the weakness of using external consultants was revealed during the early process of the training as they appeared to not fully understanding the project brief and did not deliver the desired results. They had appeared to have used an 'off-the-shelf' solution that did not complement the Team approach nor match the needs of the Dyffryn workforce. However, the second consultants who administered the MD<sup>2</sup> programme appeared to carryout a far better job. The training programme was well received by managers in different departments and at varying levels. Almost every manager I interviewed claimed they found the process constructive.

The Dyffryn Leadership Group was one of the few clear success stories of the Dyffryn transformation. This was supported by the MD<sup>2</sup> training process. The main benefit here was providing a forum whereby managers in different departments would meet each other and gain familiarity. Often there was blame being passed between departments and barriers in communication because managers did not know each other. As they met through the DLG sessions, these barriers were broken down and the various management levels realised they could become acquainted well with their counterparts. Individual managers reported that as a result they were a lot more comfortable communicating across departments. Familiarity led to increased trust. An explanation for the success of the DLG appeared to be its task orientation. Rather than simply being a social event where managers were invited to meet each other which would carry scepticism by some managers, they were working together on particular strategic or development issues. This made managers more willing to attend and participate and made the familiarisation process more effective. Notwithstanding the success of DLG, the positive outcomes of this process and MD<sup>2</sup> did not generally diffuse into individual team environments. As noted earlier, there was still strong evidence of team-level blame and in-group/out-group.

Some scholars have described teamworking as a 'soft skill' but with little elucidation about what this might involve (Mueller and Purcell, 1992). In Dyffryn, the competency framework made attempts to define teamworking as a skill. This adopted a scale according to statements for communication; problem solving; and cooperation (figure seven). However, it was unclear how they would consistently measure these skills. They were linked to the performance appraisals and appraising manager awarded individuals a score based on their individual assessment of the skills. Interviews revealed that there was little interest in the competency framework and nobody claimed to be using it for their day-to-day working. It was something that was given a few minutes thought for the purposes of the performance appraisal and then forgotten about.

The training produced some interesting effects on participating managers. Generally, the feedback for the programme was positive as a refresher or a chance to reflect on leadership issues. However, for others it carried more influence. For example, contrary to the aims of team training, team leader Rhiannon moved not towards a participative leadership approach as a result of the training but towards more direct control. Some authors suggest that under teamworking managers will move from a 'directive' role to one of 'facilitator' and 'support' (Wickens, 1987; Procter and Currie, 2004). Others note the change from 'policeman' to 'coach' is only short-lived and managers soon resort back to a command and control approach (Buchanan and Preston, 1992). The movement for Rhi was towards a stricter performance approach. Training furthered her ambitions to become a good leader which was seen, through the training materials, to be confident in terms of delegating, making decisions, and getting results. For Rhi the performance culture overrode the team culture – in other words, performance is about producing targets, getting results, and making decisions; whereas teamworking is about getting people involved, talking about how people are feeling, having lots of team meetings and discussions. So leadership for Rhi was mainly about getting results. Yet as reported earlier, this did not help Rhi achieve her goals as she was still effectively stuck in no-mans land as team leader due to the structural constraints.

### *Performance Appraisal*

The purpose of the new performance appraisal was to link with the other HR interventions in order to measure team performance and focus on improvement. The difficulty came, similar to the other HR practices, with implementing the appraisals. The period of fieldwork observations did not provide enough evidence to judge whether the appraisals could work well in the future but this was unlikely. The developmental component of the appraisal is likely to be de-motivating because it does not feed into training opportunities according to the way they have allocated training on merit not need. For example, Ryan was recognised as one of the ablest members of his team and so was identified as a good candidate for the next stage of management training. This conflicted with the training needs analysis which was based on the logic of those needing most development should be first to received more training opportunities. Some saw appraisals as threatening and did not like talking about them.

The overall effect of the HR system on Team Dyffryn was limited. DLG and training contained some benefits but appraisals and job evaluation did not convincingly reinforce the team approach.

## CHAPTER 10

## Continuous Improvement Programme

### 10.1 Introduction

This section will review the 'Continuous Improvement Programme' (CIP). This was a main initiative introduced by John that shared many of the Japanese movement aspects of teamworking. We will consider its conception, process of implementation and how it was received by employees.

### 10.2 Background to the programme

The CIP programme featured in John's transformational plan and the HR strategy document. It was viewed as the jewel in the crown of John's 'Private Sector Practices'. John informed me that he had adopted similar programmes over the last ten years in previous companies. He pointed to the positive reviews and interest in the programme from the audit commission and other local authorities. The final audit commission inspection report contained positive comments about the programme, noting:

CIP team leaders were very enthusiastic about this programme and had a clear sense of empowerment reflected by their team members. ...CIP Team Leaders feel they have learnt a lot from initial training with opportunities to discuss / exchange ideas with other team leaders. They told us that working within CIP teams encouraged participation, sharing of ideas and learning by staff. ...This project could form an important building block in the establishment of a culture of performance and continuous improvement.

Several councils had sent senior management to Dyffryn to meet John to discuss the potential for them developing their own CIP schemes. John was also keen to inform me that the programme had been featured in a local Government agency's 'good practice' management guide. On the Dyffryn intranet there is a section promoting the success stories of CIP ideas that have been implemented so far. These included: IT facilities in all committee rooms; emergency fire procedures to be taken with councillors; save electricity through automatic turnoff of PC at end of the day; tapering annual leave allowance around individual's birthdays rather than calendar

month in order to avoid yearly rush to use remaining days; and online ordering of stationery equipment.

The main aim John offered for the scheme was to 'connect with people'. It was to provide an ethos of involvement across the authority and a mechanism whereby ideas could move freely around the organisation for the purpose of improvement. The CIP intranet page described it as 'allowing all staff to make suggestions to achieve excellent performance.' This was to be achieved by establishing CIP teams which would meet every quarter or more frequently to brainstorm ideas about improving their department or the organisation corporately. Each team was headed by a CIP 'team leader' who organised each meeting and was the point of contact between teams and management. Before the teams first met for discussion, each CIP team leader was given 'CIP training' to help them appreciate the purpose of the programme. This will be considered next.

### **10.2.1 CIP Training**

John was keen to conduct the training himself as he thought this would provide the best chance of staff buying into it. He noted,

I decided to train employees in it directly myself, trying to point out to management, you know, we are not doing it in the conventional way to pass it to the directors who can then filter it out that way. I didn't want that because what filter would they place on it?

Here John was concerned about the gloss that his directors and managers would put on the programme. He worried that they would not show the enthusiasm and direction needed for staff to buy into the scheme. He demonstrated here that he felt he could not trust his managers enough to deliver what he wanted. However, the other administrative features of CIP were conducted through the normal hierarchical channels and were managed by the improvement planning department.

The training itself involved John giving a one hour PowerPoint presentation to small groups of team leaders. At the start of the programme he conducted many sessions in order to train up fifty or so initial teams. After this initial stage he now conducts top-up training sessions every few months for new team leaders and for those feeling they need a refresher. I obtained a copy of the PowerPoint presentation from one of John's

recent sessions. The presentation noted that the team leaders present were esteemed as the ‘improvement “movers and shakers” - the natural leaders in improvement.’ It then went on to describe the benefits of the programme as typically a 10-20% increase in performance for participating organisations. It was unclear where this statistic came from or what it actually referred to in relation to performance. Characteristic of John’s style, a stark choice was presented: ‘We either achieve Excellence or not: No acceptable middle-route in CIP.’ Then a summary of the scheme: ‘CIP in 6 words: DO IT RIGHT FIRST TIME. This was followed by ‘four principles’ which were described as underpinning the scheme. These were:

- 1) Excellence is conformance to *Requirements*; 2) Systems for continuous improvement is *Prevention*; 3) CIP Performance Standard is *Zero Defects*; 4) *Measurement of Excellence is Cost of Failure (COF).*”

The language of these principles appeared inappropriate for an office environment. Words like ‘prevention’, ‘zero defects’, and ‘cost of failure’ appeared more applicable to a manufacturing environment where there were physical materials and standardised criteria for operation. In most council services, work processes are considerably less predictable and explicit. Areas where these principles might be appropriate would be in the highway services, such as road surfacing and repairs; or possibly in community services, such as parks maintenance and refuse collection. However, the majority of departments did not have such explicit processes. John described the four principles as “setting some standards; you can’t do the measurement until you’ve got the standards so that corrective action can take place.” I asked John whether the principles were then used to assess the relative merits of CIP ideas. He replied somewhat defensively and contradictorily to his previous comments that management appraised the ideas according to their experience and knowledge, not through the principles. In his words, “The ideas come from left and right afield so there is no real predetermining criteria how you would assess it.” It therefore remained unclear the relevance or application of the four principles. Jen was the CIP team leader in improvement planning so I asked her what she made of the training. She reflected,

[John] did the training to try to get the message about what he was looking for and how we should operate. He basically just talked *at us* for an hour and then let us get on with it. ...we don’t use the four principles thing, didn’t see the point of them, they were just general points I suppose.



### 10.2.2 Implementation of the scheme

We have established that John had been using various forms of CIP throughout his career in the private sector. In these organisations he went through development and refinement of the concepts but most of the implementation of previous transformations was delivered by management consultants. He admitted that this is how change programmes are often introduced in large private sector organisations. Now in Dyffryn with limited resources John was keen to use his experience in the private sector to implement the CIP without external help. He commented:

We didn't have a lot of money for this sort of thing so this organisation had to find efficiencies to help improve itself. So rather than spending a few hundred thousand pounds getting an outside organisation to implement it, rightly or wrongly, I thought I could do it myself to cut the bill. ...We are doing this with almost no budget, no fanfare, no major supporting expenditure, it's mainly been resourcing of time.

For John, this provided a positive experience:

The gain from it is that I got to connect with an awful lot of people out there and passed the baton onto them with a degree of authority that they could take back to their departments.

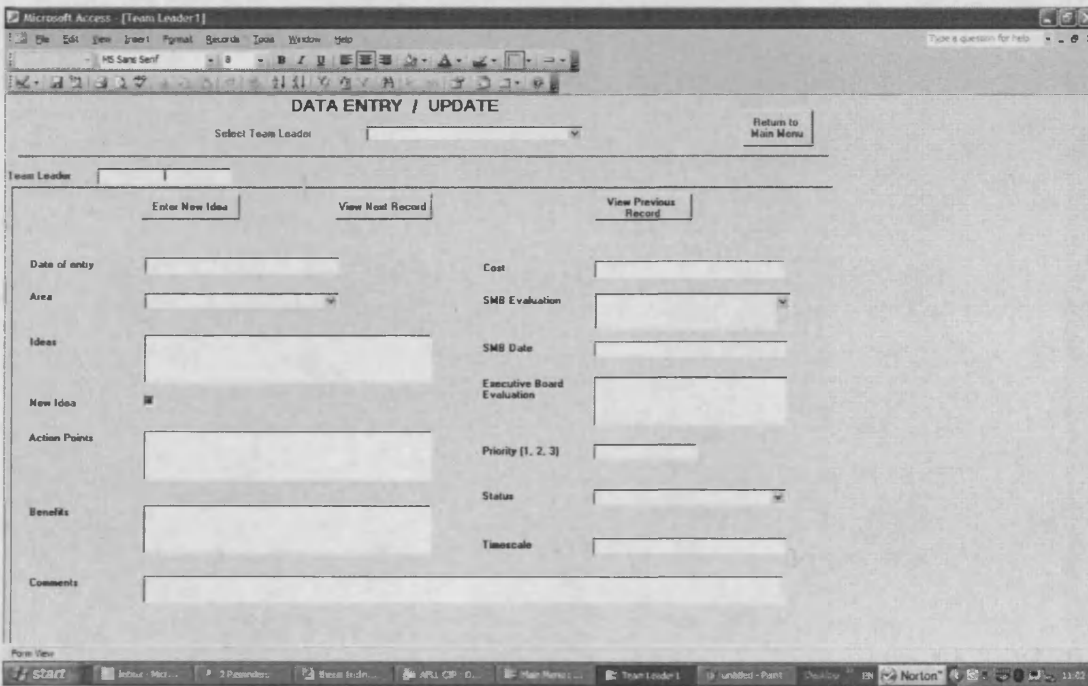
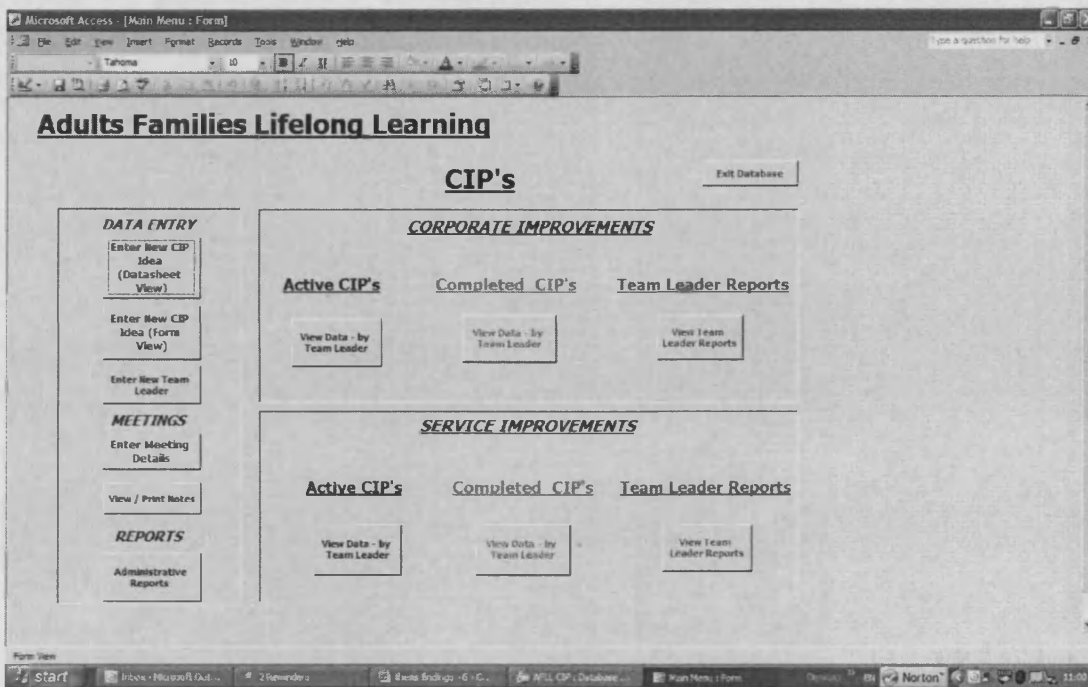
John described his strategy for introducing the programme as a five year project for full implementation. The initial stage of implementation involved setting up a CIP steering group. Improvement planning service head Barry was tasked with chairing this group. He selected Sue from his team to assist him. Also in the group were John's PA and several members of business services. Barry would oversee the initial stages of the project, which included developing a CIP intranet page, communicating across the organisation about the scheme and organising initial meetings. The staff in business services would develop the database system on which the ideas would be stored and evaluated.

Initially, around fifty teams were setup following the team leader training. Team size across departments varied from four members to thirteen members. Some of the teams were general services level teams; others were special groups, more like task forces, setup to focus on particular issues like internet development or customers services. The aim at the start was to make CIP meetings informal open-ended discussions without management presence or interference. It was thought that with management present meetings would become too formal and staff would not contribute freely.

Instead, it was an opportunity for frontline and lower-level staff to come up with ideas based on their specific work experiences in a risk-free environment. After several months of the scheme, the number of teams slowly grew as more leaders were trained. At the time of the fieldwork, John suggested that there were over 80 teams.

At the start of the programme, ideas were hand written onto an idea sheet which contained spaces for 'idea summary', 'short, medium, or long term', and 'cost'. After a few months, business services introduced an Excel spreadsheet for ideas to be inputted electronically based on the same criteria as the written sheet. Then after a further six months, business services developed a new system based on an Access database for storing the ideas. All of the idea files were stored on a special network drive so that all staff could access them easily. Figure 9 illustrates the format of the Access CIP database.

Figure 9 CIP database screenshots



This new system included many more cell details, including 'service area', 'idea', 'action points', 'benefits', 'comments', 'cost', 'SMB evaluation', 'Executive board evaluation', 'priority', and 'timescale'.

However, the usefulness of the Access database was questioned by members of various CIP teams. The development of database system seemed very ad hoc as they gradually added more buttons as functions over a period of several months. Indeed, during the fieldwork Sue said it was still under development. Many people found this confusing and were unsure about new functions and what they should be inputting. There was no real consultation or planning for the idea database – it was simply left up to business services to put it together. The head of ICT department informed me that they didn't like developing things like that because it was too easy so they left it to business services. However, the staff within business services had not been formally trained in IT or software programming. They were largely self-taught. Sue received regular enquiries about how to use the system from CIP team leaders.

### **10.3 The CIP process**

The idea was for teams to meet regularly, at least once a quarter, and input as many ideas as they could think of in an hour. Individual teams were given the freedom to run their meetings in what ever way they saw fit, depending on circumstances and the direction of the CIP team leader. They were expected to come up with at least ten ideas each session. Then CIP team leaders were invited to their respective service management board meetings to present their top three ideas to the directorate management team. Here management were expected to evaluate the ideas and pass any large scale promising ones up to the executive board meeting for directors to consider. Any smaller ideas that SMB considered promising were passed back to the respective teams, either to implement or consider further.

#### *Meetings*

Considering the wide range of services and departments adopting CIP process, it was not surprising that there was a wide variety of format used for CIP meetings. Many teams in the corporate centre were quite informal discussions in the each office, something like a tea break where everyone made a few points and then jotted down some ideas. Other teams didn't have meetings as such but came up with ideas during normal work hours and inputted them into the database at the end of the month.

In other directorates such as customer community services, the team meetings were a lot more formal and bureaucratic. Some even wrote minutes to accompany the meeting, often as evidence that a meeting had gone ahead. For example, the minutes for the catering services teams were very methodical. They first brainstormed three main problems that the service had and then worked through solutions to each problem under headings. Other teams focussed on micro-level issues like an office file index system, email letter heads, and holiday rosters. Although this was a little narrow in scope, it was perhaps closer to John's four principles in minimising costs and problems. Teams that started from open-ended 'blue sky thinking' were unfocussed and ideas were often extravagant and superficial. However, it was the hope of a 'big idea' emerging that was to keep them going. It was the way that teams fed into the hierarchy through SMB and executive board which made individuals within CIP teams feel that they had to come up with big and impressive ideas. This seemed to hinder more than help in this sense. For other departments, such as carers and social workers in Integrated Children Services, there were many part-time or irregular workers. They therefore found it difficult to have formal meetings. To get around this they developed other forms of ideas generation such as notices boards to pin ideas, suggestion boxes, text messages and an interesting sounding 'CIP hotline'.

### *Ideas*

Analysis of the Access idea database revealed a total of 458 ideas inputted across all directorates. Ideas were split into two main categories; 'corporate', which denoted ideas that are relevant to the organisation as a whole; and 'service', which were ideas specific to the demands or context of the specific department. Every directorate had their own database file and entries were placed under the name of each CIP team leader. As might be expected, most databases had more entries for service level ideas than corporate.

The way that the databases were organised and coded made diagnostic analysis of the ideas very difficult. Apart from the total number of ideas in the system and a few broad categories of 'active idea', 'completed idea' or 'not yet evaluated', no one had a good understanding of what ideas were in the system. Individual teams knew what ideas they had submitted and SMB management teams became aware of the select few ideas that were presented, but otherwise management were in the dark. The

director for Corporate Centre displayed this inadvertently when she discussed the progress of CIP in the Quarterly Business Review. Her presentation contained several pie charts which broke the data down into the three categories noted above. This data was ambiguous and difficult to understand what use it had. This became more apparent when I discovered that there was considerable overlap between the ‘active’ ideas and ‘not yet evaluated’ ideas. Someone in the QBR audience suggested that many ideas were being replicated across the databases and it was difficult to know what was going on. The director agreed. Another director in the audience suggested that teams should manually browse the ideas of other teams before they start their own brainstorming. But considering that there were over 80 teams and hundreds of ideas, this would take a huge amount of time, not to mention the memory and comprehension required to know if each idea had been offered before. This perhaps links back to the fact that inexperienced business services staff were responsible for developing the database and it therefore lacked planning and foresight.

After playing around with the database data, the only way to distil useful categories of ideas was to manually go through the database and draw out the interesting variables into new tables. With over 450 ideas in the system this took some time to achieve. Table 11 provides a breakdown of the ideas across directorates. The table shows that customer community had the most ideas, followed by corporate centre and FARM. Every directorate had more service ideas than corporate ideas, apart from corporate centre. It is clear that ideas to do with staff training were universally popular, coming either first or second for every directorate. Other popular ideas areas were ICT equipment and software, renovation/ accommodation improvement, and holidays.

**Table 11 CIP Idea Breakdown**

<b>Ideas</b>	<b>Corporate Centre</b>	<b>Customer community</b>	<b>Customer Corporate</b>	<b>FARM</b>	<b>IAS</b>	<b>ICS</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Corporate</b>	60	57	18	22	4	7	167
<b>Service</b>	42	84	21	44	7	40	235
<b>Total</b>	102	141	39	66	11	47	458

**Table 11 (Continued)**

Top 5 areas:							
1	Training	Task spec.	Task spec.	Task spec.	Reports	Task spec.	Task spec.
2	Task Spec.	Renovation	Training	Training	Training	Training	Training
3	IT equip.	Holidays	Renovation	e-forms	Mail	Mail	Renovation
4	Intranet	Telephone	IT equip.	Finance	Task spec.	Email	ICT equip.
5	Holidays	CIP improve	Finance	Intranet	Emails	Report	Holidays

Figure 10 reveals the top twenty idea areas overall. The largest area is task specific ideas. This includes specific points about work processes or procedures. The second biggest area is training. This was likely to be influenced through the recent MD<sup>2</sup> programme and keenness of lower level staff to be receiving training. The next three areas were related to staff wanting more comfortable work environment or rewards. Renovation was a popular area, including things such as repainting, carpets and furniture. ICT equipment was also popular. Many ideas referred to wanting mobile IT equipment for when they were off-site or new printers. Then there was a strong interest in rewards and holidays. Many ideas requested extra days holiday for long service or good sickness records. ICT systems/processes also featured strongly with intranet development, email, e-forms and telephone system. It was also interesting to note that ideas about improving the CIP programme itself were fairly common, being the tenth most popular area. Areas that were popular but didn't get into the top twenty included HR forms, ID badges, stationery procurement/ storage and refreshment facilities.

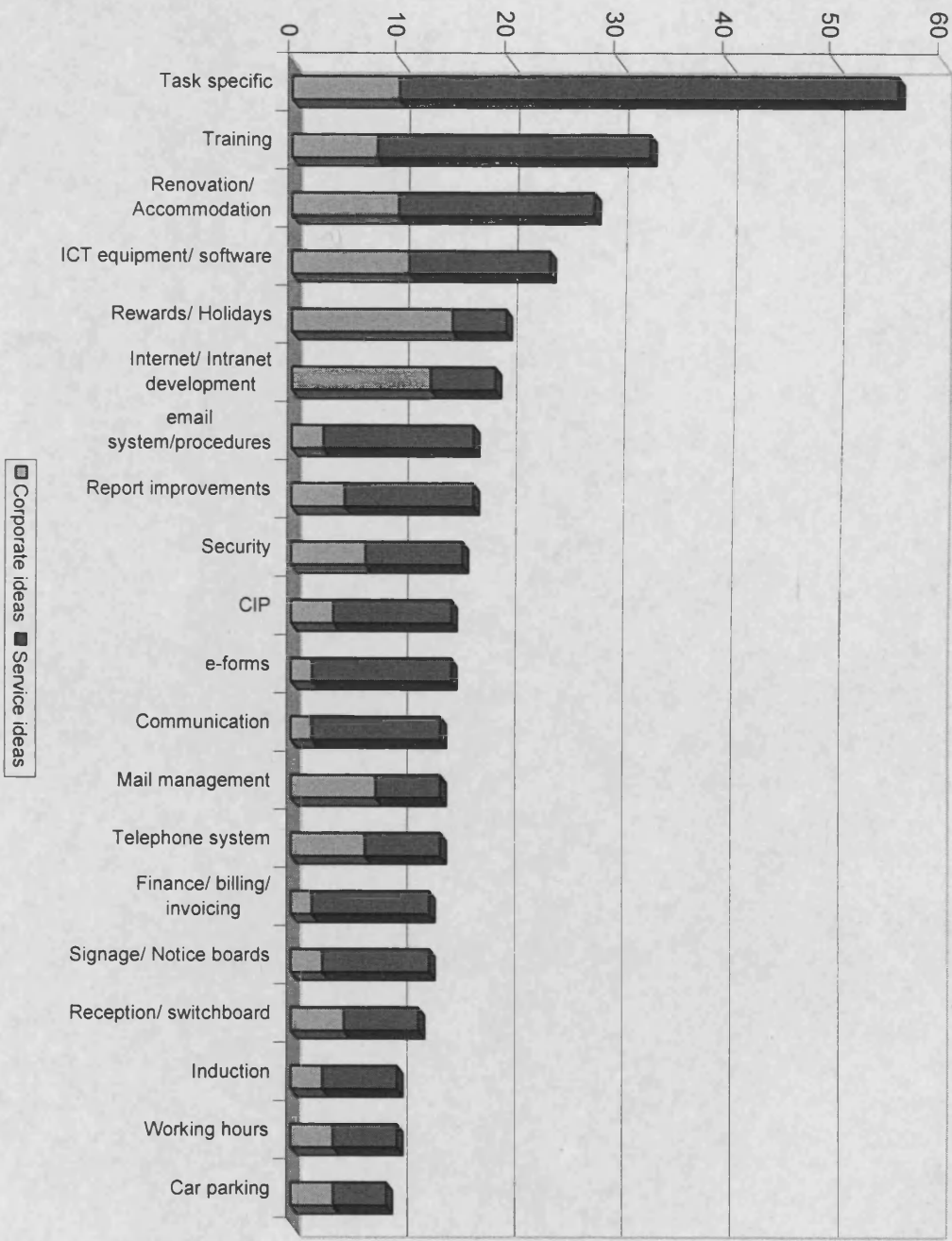


Figure 10 CIP Top 20 Idea Areas



Particularly strange ideas included: the accountancy department suggesting “Improve Dyffryn’s reputation by tackling the causes of antisocial behaviour.”; Highways services: “Hoard the materials”; Catering services: “Plant a conifer instead of the tacky fake Christmas tree and take down the Santa Clause ladder”; Possibly most unexpected, from Waste management service: “healthy options in vending machines please”.

### *Evaluation in SBM*

I observed one particular SMB meeting where a CIP team leader for the HR department was presenting ideas. This meeting will serve as illustrating the kind of CIP evaluation process. The SMB meeting ran as normal with the CIP team leader present listening to the conversation. The CIP discussion was the final item on the agenda, so at this point the CIP team leader was invited to present the team’s ideas. The first idea mentioned was sending Christmas cards to all local residents containing the council refuse collection times and other useful council information. In response to this idea the corporate centre service managers looked around the room smirking to each other. After a few muffled negative comments from people, the director said ‘Interesting idea, CIP team to progress’. This meant that they were sending the idea back to team to consider more details, such as how much it would cost, etc. The next idea was to give ‘long service annual leave’ as a reward for long tenure offering a few days holiday. However, another HR officer in the meeting piped up to say this was against HR employment law because it discriminates against people of short tenure. The evaluation was thus ‘not to progress’. The team leader then went through a few more ideas, such as reusing internal envelopes, providing car parking spaces for staff, and reviewing the frequency of electrical equipment testing. There was not much enthusiasm for any of the ideas, although the director again suggested ‘team to progress’ for the electrical testing idea. None of the ideas specifically related to the HR department and it was therefore obscure as to how the ideas were generated. In particular, the idea about Christmas cards would be the firm responsibility of the communications/PR department, removed from the responsibilities of HR. Sitting in this session suggested that the CIP process had got rather slow and ineffective. The CIP team leader presented the ideas with awkward acquiescence: ‘The only other one

*they* came up with was...’ The ideas were extremely varied and the management team considered each one on only a few words summary of the idea without much further context or evidence. Most service managers did not seem to take the process seriously and would make comments such as ‘Oh no, not that one again!’, ‘Yeah, we’ve heard that idea before!’ or simply just belittle the idea with a smirk or chuckle. This made the presenting CIP team leaders uncomfortable and clearly went against the ‘risk-free’ open-ended ideal that John intended. During an interview with John about the scheme he had said ‘the management are not permitted to reject the ideas without an explanation.’ This was not the case in my experience. When asking Jen about SBM evaluations she reflected,

The SMB just send most ideas back for team to progress but with no real guidelines as to how. The ideas are just left then and we end up talking about new ideas in SMB.

Jen described the ‘pointless’ process of presenting ideas, being told to progress the idea, nothing being done on the ideas, and then returning three months later with more ideas. The service head of ICT who sits within the corporate centre SMB was equally frank about the inefficacy of the process:

It’s a load of bollocks as far as I’m concerned. Most of the ideas are total crap and when there is a possible good one nothing gets done on it. The teams either don’t know how to implement the ideas or they can’t be bothered.

### *Managing the process*

Building on from the last section, managing the CIP process was a difficult job for Sue and Barry in Improvement Planning. It was accepted that there were widespread problems with getting the good ideas from the database and evaluating them effectively. There was also a pervasive lack of momentum and enthusiasm for the process. Jen perhaps typified this when she admitted during a general conversation in the office, ‘I can’t really be arsed with CIP anymore. It’s a load of crap’; while a manager in an adjacent office walked in one day and announced ‘I’ve washed my hands of it’. The director of corporate centre was aware of this general resistance and decline in interest so she brought it up with the executive board. The meeting minutes summarised, ‘lines of responsibility [for CIP] are currently blurred, particularly in respect of taking ideas forward. [We need to] achieve consistency throughout and procedural guidelines to maintain momentum.’ The board decided that developing ‘CIP champions’ would be a good idea to clarify the lines of responsibility and

facilitate procedural guidelines. These would be supervisors or experienced members of staff who would hold an active interest in the progress of CIP teams within their department. They would meet under a ‘CIP champions steering group’ to discuss how best they could encourage their staff to participate and make the CIP programme run effectively. However, establishing this group turned out to be another difficult task. Few managers or supervisors were willing to take up the role of ‘CIP champion’, largely because they were “too busy” to take it on. After talking to Sue about the process, it was clear she was fed up with trying to lead the CIP programme. She reflected “I hate having to *do* CIP. It’s the poisoned chalice.” When I asked her what she meant by this she replied, ‘Well it is. Everyone knows it’s the “poisoned chalice”’. She added,

John thinks we’re over there with CIP [gesturing with hand to the left into the distance] when we are actually somewhere over here [pointing down to the floor]. ...It’s his baby – he’s busy telling us how it should be done with a million teams and we are all saying no!

I asked Sue whether it could be something that people enjoyed getting involved with because they could have a say rather than letting management make all the decisions. Sue responded incredulously, ‘Yeah I suppose... but we don’t want to make it too much of an onerous task.’ I asked Sue if she thought CIP was actually a good thing. She responded quickly, ‘It’s a good thing for the council because it was highlighted in a best practice guide as a good thing. But some people view it as just another thing to do.’ The ‘good for the council’ argument was similar a comment made by another member of the team who said that the “Team Dyffryn” re-branding was ‘good for council’ because the audit commission liked it. In this way, the new initiatives were attempts to satisfy external regulators and were not seen as beneficial for the internal organisation.

#### **10.4 Perspectives on the programme**

The CIP programme was something that almost everyone had a strong opinion about. The consensus was that, overall, the programme was not working very well. A wide range of explanations were given for this. It was ironic that one of the things that people were willing to offer ideas about was how to improve the CIP programme. These are considered below.

### *Idea generation and database design*

As shown in the ideas section above, there were a large number of ideas coming through the system. Lots of these were task specific minor suggestions for work processes, however, figure 10 demonstrated that many of the same kind of ideas were repeated across the organisation. There were around twenty ideas to improve holidays, for example. The database design was to blame to a large extent. One councillor mentioned in a QBR meeting when discussing CIP, “We are worried that there are a lot of ideas that are getting out and disappearing into a black hole.” He meant that the management of ideas was inadequate and counterproductive. Team leaders were noting that now that the scheme was in its third year, the teams were running out of ideas. A team member in ICT suggested “It’s getting stale. We need some fresh faces.”

### *Team numbers and process*

The number of teams was an issue for Sue and Barry. Too many teams – “they could merge a lot of teams”. One councillor in a QBR discussion on CIP was interested to know what the outcome of the ideas were, what are they saving, what the methodology was for judging ideas and the outcomes. The answering director replied: “we haven’t got measures”. The councillor was adamant in return: “everything is measurable. This is important”.

At different times, the senior managers in the Corporate Centre directorate summed up their impressions of the programme. Barry suggested:

I think We’ve got to rejuvenate the whole thing in many respects. I think we need to motivate people by showing them the success stories.

Training? John was trying to get across the purpose of improvement because people didn’t see it as part of their jobs. So the best way to do that was through the four principles. John did all the training which was good but we have to pick it up to make sure it is still working and moving along.

...The stumbling block at the moment is that people don’t know what is happening with the ideas. There’s been a lot of interest on it from outside but there is this sort of thing in other organisations. I think for it to be improved it needs to be more controlled, it can be less bureaucratic, and we need to be more consistent as well. Some teams are taking minutes which is a little too much. It needs tightening. I think there is a big future for it. But not just people coming up with ideas but doing something with it. You have to get around people saying ‘why have you asked me to do it’ and the old favourite ‘I

haven't got time for it.' I'm quite optimistic, I quite like it. It puts improvement into every department, not just our department because it has 'improvement' in it.

It was interesting to see that they had managed to generate 'strong interest' from other councils even though the process was not working very well in Dyffryn. This was a sign of John's PR skills.

In another department of the council, community services, the director had set up a similar scheme to CIP, called 'bright ideas'. He was offering a reward for this staff of £50 for a good idea. Barry saw this as conflicting with CIP and was not very happy about it. He spoke to the director of Corporate Centre about it, but they did not approach the director responsible for Bright Ideas.

#### Director of Corporate Centre on CIP:

I think CIP has done really well. I think their operational day to day management of CIP is really good, I think we could just take more of a lead in inspiring people and taking a lead and getting people together, I don't think there is anything wrong with the organisation operationally [she is conscious that I have worked in Improvement planning here], this is confidential now within these four walls, but I think the inspiration side of it.

CIP – it generally works very well in this directorate, we have a lot of active teams. Our ideas have tended to be corporate, rather than service, so I have asked them to focus on services now. Some of the ideas have been implemented already, e.g. a white board to let know who is in. other things people are already dealing with like in Greg's area. Some things have been really good ideas like turning off PCs at the end of the day. Small ideas can be implemented by teams on their own, they don't always need to go to Exec board. There has been a logjam in Executive board, we were supposed to look at CIP one in every 4 exec boards (every 2 months) but other things have always cropped up on the agenda. There is a backlog, maybe about 10 ideas in our corporate centre.

#### Team leader in IAS, Regina:

The problem I see is to involve people on the frontline. The people who work in residential homes and social workers, etc. they don't have a permanent base, they don't work in the office 9-5 so it is a bit tricky getting their input. But they could be going into our customers and thinking 'oh they could be doing it this way' and come up with a good improvement. But how do they get that information back to me. One of the ideas I have had is to have a CIP 'hotline' – a telephone number they can contact, another thing is to have a notice board in the residential homes so people can pin up ideas and rather than having

teams, we would have a lead person who brings the ideas together. You know we hire care workers to care for people, they haven't got IT skills, so having it on a system isn't going to work for them recording it on a computer. Another thing is to setup a text messaging system for ideas. It's because they all have different shifts all over the borough and they are our most important workers I think, they are ones having contact with our customers. I think social workers have bases. The potential problem with CIP is that people can think it is just extra work, trying to get it over to them – no it's not extra work because it could be benefiting how you work in the end. And sometimes we are not looking for the really big ideas; it's the small ideas that make the service more efficient.

### **10.5 Discussion of CIP programme**

The CIP programme shared many of the traits identified by other studies of quality circle type schemes. The programme was strongly driven by John but with little support from middle and lower level managers. It became known by some employees as the 'poisoned chalice', not quite the image that John had hoped for. There were other fundamental problems with the design of the database which made the process highly de-motivating for participating employees. The experience of employees during the Dyffryn team change period is summarised succinctly by a team leader within Business Services:

We have gone from having a very poor inspection report and with nothing going on and then John coming in like a whirlwind and him introducing everything. So there has been nothing in between. This has been difficult for people to get used to.

The CIP programme was the clearest example of 'Japanese' teams in Dyffryn. It was well received in the wider local government community because it shared the aims of continuous improvement promoted in the Wales Programme for Improvement. As a result the programme received positive media attention and was featured in a local government best practice guide.

The programme itself was based on four principles of improvement which were taken directly from 'Japanese' quality jargon. Due to the general manufacturing application of these principles based on reduction of waste, the relevance for the council office environment was questionable. John did not trust his management team to implement the scheme: 'what spin would they put on it?' This again demonstrated the inherent contradictions of the Team Dyffryn approach and lack of trust throughout the organisation. It again was a team initiative that people had no choice but to join

according to the prescription of the chief executive. There were technical and administrative problems in the implementation. Due to John's protective ownership of the scheme there was insufficient communication among the IT department, senior management and the department responsible for administering CIP team processes. This led one organiser of the CIP process to call it 'the poisoned chalice'. The fundamental problem with the process was the database not being designed in a way that ideas could be intuitively organised and retrieved. There was lack of understanding across departments and many ideas were duplicated or lost.

Another implementation problem was 'organisational dualism' commonly reported by commentators (e.g. Hill, 1991). CIP teams were added to the normal office routines in an ad hoc fashion that employees found difficult to integrate with their established routines. This meant CIP team meetings often went ahead only after several reminders from organisers and with little enthusiasm. Team managers usually had other more pressing priorities and did little to promote the scheme. When ideas were produced CIP team leaders felt uncomfortable presenting these to the management meetings because they felt they would not be taken seriously. As Delbridge et al. (2000) note, 'structural conservatism' of using the established management chain to assess ideas gave CIP teams little incentive to come up with good ideas. If team members were routinely ignored when coming up with ideas within their regular team meetings, why would CIP be any different? Observations during management board meetings confirmed employee fears in this regard. Over time, CIP teams lost all enthusiasm for the scheme. Few ideas were being taken forward and team members started to ask why they should continue to participate (Black and Ackers, 1988).

The CIP programme lacked many of the requirements for success outlined by Caffyn (1999) and demonstrated the typical lack of success of 'Japanese' initiatives in western settings. The public sector implementation followed very similar experience to reports in private sector experiments.

## CHAPTER 11

## Conclusions

### 13.1 Introduction

Teamworking is a longstanding concept in the management literature and has demonstrated particular growth in the last two decades through the fashions of Japanese quality management, employee involvement and self-management. This study has looked at a variety of ways to approach the concept and has considered the extent to which teamworking is a useful concept to describe contemporary work organisation. Context-sensitivity has also been a central concern, which has been observed through the public sector context of local Government. We will now consider how the study has built on the work of others in the field and make some final observations about the contributions of the project. We will also consider the limitations of the study and point towards future work.

### 13.2 Study Contributions

This study has contributed both theoretically and empirically to the team literature. After reviewing team conceptualisation over the last fifty years, certain observations can be made about the significance of team theory. First, considering how the concept developed it is surprising how popular it has remained in the literature as a cure-all for organisational ills. The various, flexible and sometimes ambiguous, notions of teamworking can all be seen as feeding into a long term attempt at finding a balance between the rational and natural systems perspectives of organising (Scott, 1987). The aims of this endeavour can be seen to have failed despite the tenacity of supporters. A careful reading of the Tavistock studies and Japanese movement reveal a concept more vulnerable than many authors suggest. The theoretical principles of STS, while logical and interesting, are too complex and embedded for individual team managers to implement. The principles of lean teams seem applicable to specific manufacturing work contexts, but do not translate easily into other work environments and industries. The Tavistock AWG studies promised much but delivered relatively little long-term change in practice. Many of the studies were stopped prematurely due to the 'dynamic



conservatism' of participating managers (Schon, 1971). The change programmes were characterised by early optimism and success but after several years they tended to fizzle out or were abandoned. The successful application of autonomous work groups was therefore limited, particularly as a general organising concept. Momentum and popularity in the potential of teamworking has been maintained through reports of occasional success stories, optimism on behalf of the Tavistock and Japanese quality researchers, and the public relations efforts of team 'discourse entrepreneurs' (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 2000). The Japanese team experiments in western settings realised only modest success (see, for example, Delbridge et al., 2000). Quality circles and TQM were eagerly adopted by UK and USA organisations in manufacturing, services and even in the public sector. However, like many of the STS experiments, Japanese quality initiatives were short-lived in the UK and quickly faded out of fashion.

After careful analysis and empirical investigation the findings of this study have balanced on the side of teamworking critics. The strength of the methodology employed in the project has been the opportunity it provided to observe team activities several years into the change programme. This is the period when new working methods typically start to lose momentum and when employees begin to seriously question the purpose and direction of change. In the Dyffryn case, problems could be seen to emerge due to contradictory messages from senior management; strategic short-termism; line manager resistance; lack of attention to implementation issues; and trying to implement too much with too little. The comments of one team leader were useful in summarising the experience of employees – 'we went from having nothing in place, to having everything, with nothing in between... this was very difficult'. Observations of the CIP programme best encapsulated the unsuccessful transition.

The main strength of this study has been the focus on detailed description and contextually based analysis. Many studies in the literature offer little detail about the activities of teams and have been distracted by fashionable concerns such as the 'issue of autonomy'. With detailed observation and description, team concepts move from being static definitions to dynamic events and instances. This is more revealing of the fragility and informality of team activities.

The research questions for the study were set out as: 1) What is the motivation for senior managers introducing teamworking initiatives? 2) How do employees experience working in teams? 3) To what extent are specific team approaches in organisations clear applications of one of the two team traditions? 4) How does teamworking affect decision making? 5) To what extent does HRM support teamworking activities? These issues were discussed at length in chapters 8-10. Specific conclusions answering these questions are as follows:

First, senior managers can be motivated to use teamworking as a means of softening the hard realities of organisational change. Attempts to signal the movement towards a 'team approach' create contradictions at the organisational level, largely because traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic structures are retained. While there may be short-term gains through novelty and soft influence tactics, employees soon wake up to the workplace reality of control and performance management. Furthermore, teamworking can too easily be sold as a panacea for all organisational performance problems. Senior management in Dyffryn linked team change to the organisational structure, culture, HR system and performance management. It was used as a quick and cheap method of organisational change; which in reality meant a shallow and ambiguous form of change. This demonstrates the susceptibility towards a faddish approach which promises much but delivers little.

Second, team processes, such as communication, collaborative problem solving and meetings, directly conflict with managerial processes, such as leadership, efficiency and performance. This was demonstrated through the role conflict of the team leader position. Furthermore, team processes tend to be interpreted and implemented in traditionally bureaucratic ways leading to more stress and less satisfaction for employees. Employees come to resent team initiatives because they become a euphemism for performance management and control. Team initiatives even became a 'poisoned chalice' for employees.

Third, office team processes contrast dramatically to descriptions of manufacturing team processes. The main explanation being the task environment and informality of office tasks in comparison to the programmed sequences of production lines. This

impacted on the analysis of interdependence, autonomy and flexibility which were seen to be highly informal and variable. Information technology through computer display equipment emerged as one way in which office interdependence could be facilitated. The team approach observed here appeared to be an uncomfortable mixture of STS and Japanese principles. This suggests that there are no clear theoretically-driven channels by which senior managers pick up and introduce teamworking. A distinction in team traditions did not appear to be appreciated or contemplated by management when introducing teams. This builds onto the idea that teamworking is frequently viewed by practitioners as an easy fix for organisational change. Everyone, it appears, can be an expert in teamworking.

Fourth, adopting a structure which has both formal team managers and informal team leaders was unsuccessful in the local government office environment. This could be viewed as a hybrid between STS and Japanese team principles but led to conflict in authority relations and a distraction to team processes. The resulting organisational structure trapped certain levels of employees between a performance culture on one side and a participative culture on the other with no means to effectively participate in either. Rather than improve and speed up decision making, this approach slowed down decision making processes which were increasingly left to bureaucratic meetings. Moreover, the team leadership structure led to ambiguity of decision roles. The team were unsure which kinds of decisions they were allowed to make in which meeting. In sum, the team approach did not improve decision making.

Fifth, training was the most successful component of the team approach from the perspective of the HR system. Training increased inter-departmental communication and motivation for managers. Other HR initiatives, such as appraisals and job evaluation, were less helpful in supportive team activities. Quality circles failed in local government office environments due to the informality of office tasks, dualistic tendencies and lack of management encouragement. Generally, although the training programme was successful, HR can be seen to have a weak supporting impact of team working activities.

The findings in a hitherto undeveloped team context of local Government provide added contributions in discovering what practitioners understand by the notion of

teamworking. Here, as in studies in other contexts, teamworking was a multi-dimensional and flexible concept that applied to many different organisational levels, processes and events. It was also an approach that was used to legitimise organisational change for the benefit of the external regulatory culture of UK local Government. For example, teamworking was 'good because the auditors liked it'. This finding can be added to the range of management objectives for introducing teamworking and can be seen to link with wider ideas of New Institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) and industry-specific 'best practice'. In other words, in addition to a consideration of organisational structure and processes, teamworking operated in a wider context of reputation for innovative management techniques. Contrary to the findings of detailed ethnographic observation, from the outside, teamworking could be seen to be a successful new form of organising in local Government. Team Dyffryn was a huge success, even if not for workers on the inside.

### **13.3 Research Limitations**

The ethnographic approach to data collection offers particular benefits for understanding teamworking but also has its limitations. The detailed descriptions of participant observations are labour intensive and time consuming. The range of research participants and observed events were necessarily narrow and lacked breadth in the study. This presented several problems. Most obvious was the lack of comparative data among different teams, departments, and organisations. Limited generalisations are therefore possible about the wider population. Also, the high level of description provided a problem for data presentation. Transcript notes extended to over 80,000 words, which with added supporting narrative, had to be reduced to less than a third to fulfil the length requirements of the thesis results. Decisions therefore had to be made about what to include and what to leave out. In the end, it was decided to focus a lot of the internal team discussion on a single team within a single department of the organisation. This approach retained the rich description but lost more general coverage of the case. Another limitation of the methodology was a relatively short period in the field of around three months. A longer period of observation is always desirable to shorter periods. However, there was a certain degree of data saturation towards the end of the project – the main routines and processes of the office were well understood. A further limitation is the highly

singular context of the case study. While this made the case interesting, it also means that comparisons with other cases and research will be more challenging.

In general, the limitations of the research rest with the lack of data breadth across the wider local Government population. This reflected the explorative aims of the project.

### **13.4 Future Work**

This study has contributed to the team debate by interrogating team history and theory and presenting empirical findings in an undeveloped research context. However, rather than producing all the answers to the debate, the study has identified many areas for further development. The mission to reconcile the team traditions through a 'theory of everything' and produce an all-encompassing definition has become stale. Teamworking does not start with individual teams which build up to the organisational level. It is often used more generally as a vehicle for organisational change and a form of HRM, diffusing down through organisational layers in unpredictable ways. More thought needs to be put into capturing teamworking initiatives at different levels in the organisation. Important levels identified in this study have been senior management strategy, HR department and individual team managers and supervisors. Future work needs to come up with imaginative ways to assess these different levels. Rather than attempting to measure concepts such as team autonomy, which has been shown through many studies to be limited and fragile, future work should consider other aspects of team interaction. Technology and teams is an important area for future work. The socio-technical theorists who advocated autonomous work groups regarded technology as a necessary evil to produce efficiency gains. They regarded employee choice as the antithesis to technology; social arrangement of employees then became the more exciting area. However, they were primarily viewing technology as programmed mechanical machines. This needs to be updated to consider the socio-technical interactions which result from information technology. This need not be in the area of 'virtual teams' but in how technology can augment face-to-face team interactions.

Team training emerged as the most important aspect of HR in the study. However, the training programme was not without its problems. More specific work needs to look

at how team training is devised and implemented. Team barriers were a major problem in the study. When individual team environments are strong, the relationship between teams is weak. Future work needs to be done to consider how inter-team relationships can be improved. Training and cross-department initiatives such as the 'Dyffryn leadership group' are one potential area. Finally, although challenging, different methodologies should be explored. The benefits of the ethnographic approach were revealed as producing detailed descriptions with sensitivity to the context. However, the change processes were still observed passively. Future work may benefit from adopting a more involved action research approach like much of the early STS work. Such a strategy would need to be long-term to overcome the typical three year implementation problem. Yet the theoretical and practical benefits of such an approach could potentially lead to some of the strongest contributions to this area.

This thesis has shown that teamworking remains an important area within management studies. It is still popular among scholars and managers and continues to be used as a method of organisational change, control and HRM. This study has found that teamworking is a useful concept to describe management attempts to control organisations. It is being used in the previously uncovered team context of local Government to legitimise change strategies and appeal to external regulators. This project started with initial hope in the progressive potential of teamworking but also with reticence over its fashionable and faddish tendencies. The case study has led to cautious and critical conclusions about the concept. I have demonstrated that team discourse can too easily be consumed by managers as a way to legitimise traditional performance and control regimes. At the organisational level, teamworking has been observed to carry numerous implementation problems and internal contradictions. Furthermore, teams provided little benefit for employees beyond the supportive social interactions that take place in all small offices. Thus, from current evidence we must remain cautious about the potential of teamworking. However, the debate is by no means over. Both sides must continue to look for more evidence to further understand this important and longstanding management idea.

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